METAL HAMMER

THE 25 GREATEST SYMPHONIC METAL ALBUMS EVER

~~POSERS~~. ~~CHANCERS~~. SURVIVORS.

BULLET FOR MY VALENTINE

OZZY OSBOURNE
How *No More Tears* saved his career

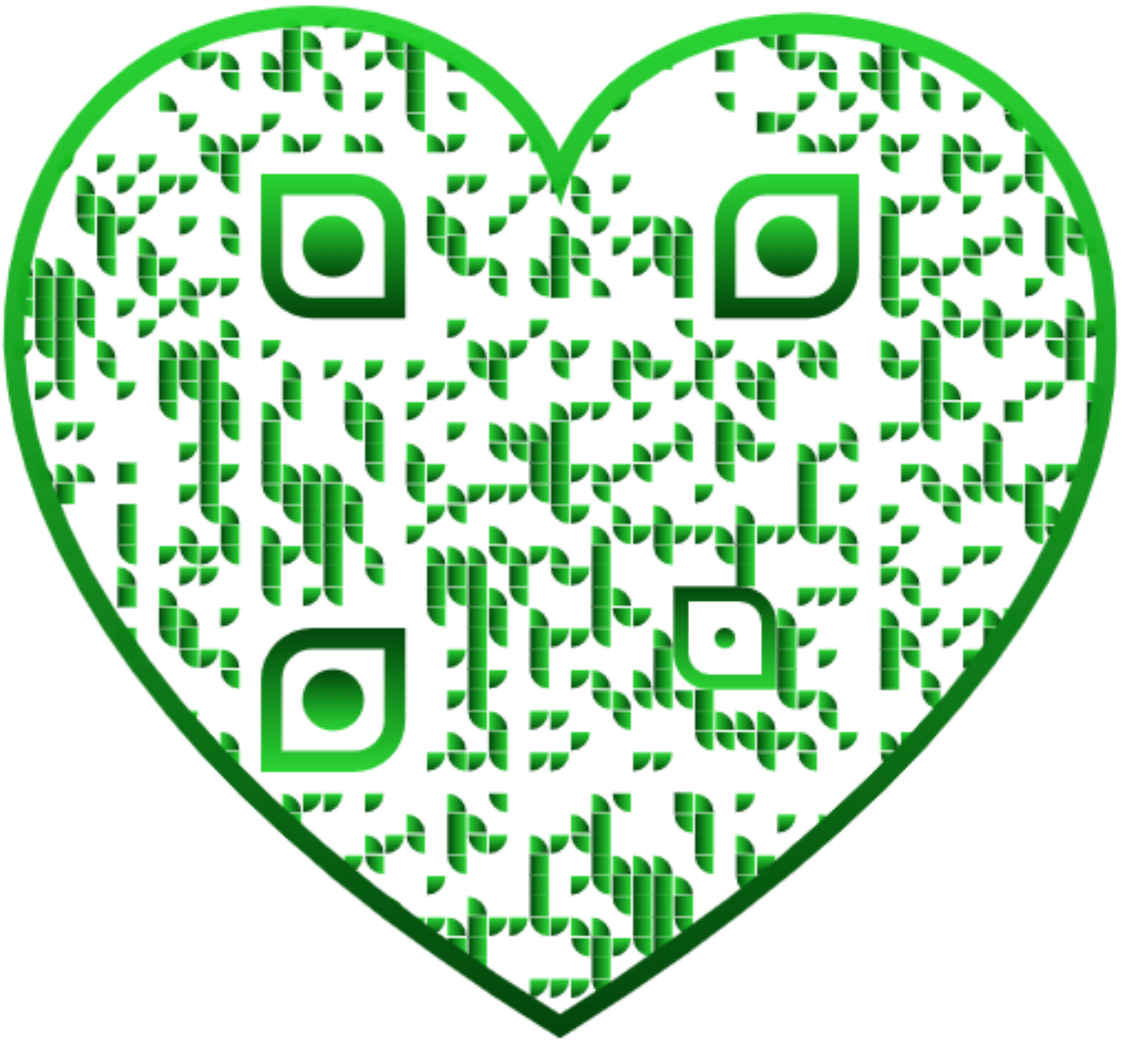
MASTODON
Inside their emotional new masterpiece

ICE NINE KILLS
Zombies. Gore. *Child's Play*. Riffs.

CRADLE OF FILTH
Dani Filth: The Metal Hammer Interview

FUTURE
ISSUE 354

+ WITCH FEVER • DREAM THEATER • VENOM PRISON • DORO • ASKING ALEXANDRIA • MEGADETH



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Email enquiries **help@magazinesdirect.com**
UK orderline & enquiries **0330 333 1113**
Overseas order line and enquiries **+44 330 333 1113**
Online orders & enquiries **www.magazinesdirect.com**
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Printed by William Gibbons & Sons Ltd on behalf of Future

Distributed by Marketforce, 5 Churchill Place, Canary Wharf, London, E14 5HU
www.marketforce.co.uk Tel: 0203 787 9060

ISSN 0955-1190

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Metal Hammer (ISSN 0955-1190) November, Issue 354, is published monthly with an extra issue in March by Future Publishing, Quay House, The Ambury, Bath, BA1 1UA, UK

The US annual subscription price is $194.87 Airfreight and mailing in the USA by agent named World Container Inc., c/o BBT 150-15 183rd St, Jamaica, NY 11413, USA

Application to Mail at Periodicals Postage Prices is Pending at Brooklyn NY 11256.

POSTMASTER: Send address changes to Metal Hammer, World Container Inc., c/o BBT 150-15 183rd St, Jamaica, NY 11413, USA

Subscription records are maintained at Future Publishing, c/o Air Business Subscriptions, Rockwood House, Perrymount Road, Haywards Heath, West Sussex, RH16 3DH. UK

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HATED. ADORED. NEVER IGNORED.

BULLET FOR MY Valentine have never been given an easy ride from the metal world. When *The Poison* went supernova in 2005, it brought as many new fans to the genre as it inspired frothing, cross-eyed rage from behind thousands of keyboards. And yet, more than 15 years on, Bullet are still here, still huge and still adored by the fans that have stuck by them.

That's not to say they've not had their ups and downs in that time, though. 2018's experimental *Gravity* was a divisive step to say the least – which is perhaps why they're back with their heaviest album ever, a tellingly self-titled slice of no-nonsense, balls-out heavy fucking metal. We caught up with the band for their most candid interview ever – no stone left unturned, no question left unanswered as we looked to bring you the most definitive Bullet cover ever.

There's tons more in this issue, too – from counting down the greatest symphonic metal albums ever, to a deep dive inside the emotional new Mastodon album, to celebrating 30 years of an Ozzy classic. Dig in, enjoy and, as always, thanks for your support.

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MEET THE BAND

EMMA JOHNSTON
WRITER
While most horror movies make her want to duck behind the sofa, Emma swallowed her fears to chat to gore-loving upstarts Ice Nine Kills ahead of their gruesome new album. Hey, it is October after all! Happy Spooky Season!

JAKE OWENS
PHOTOGRAPHER
Jake has been a big part of the *Hammer* family for years now – and he has the tattoo to show it – but this month marks his first official cover with us! Also, he has the cutest dog in the history of Hammer contributors. Look at that face!

RICH HOBSON
WRITER
Rich first pitched us an anniversary piece on *No More Tears* months back, and after managing to get not just Ozzy himself, but legendary six-stringer Zakk Wylde in for the interview, he came up with a cracking feature.

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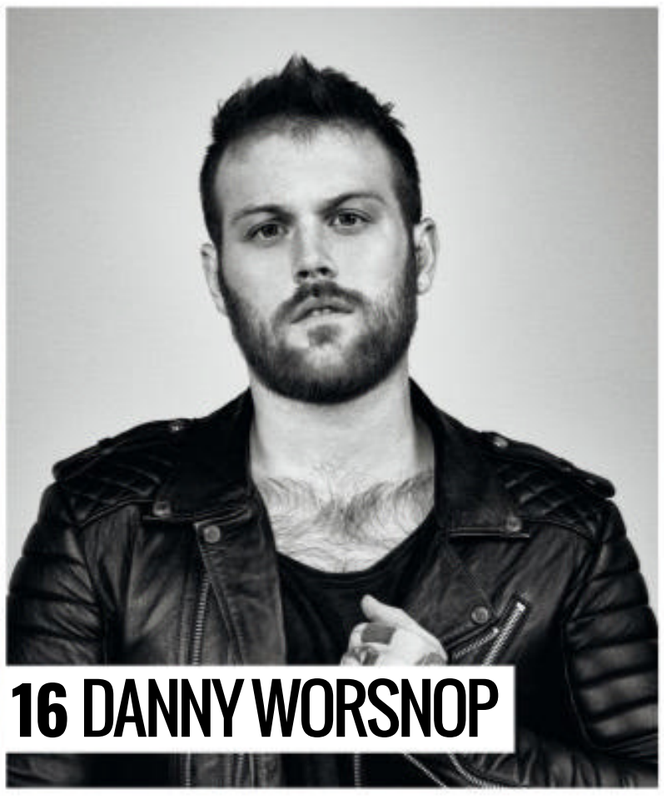

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SUBSCRIBE NOW & SAVE
Head to p.34 for details

70 DANI FILTH

98 LAMB OF GOD

THE BIG PICTURE

ARIES ‘EBEN’ TANTO 1975-2021

PRESS/REFANTHO RAMADHAN

Metal Hammer was devastated to learn of the passing of Burgerkill guitarist and founding member, Aries Tanto – widely known as Eben – at the age of 46 last month. Burgerkill have been pioneers of the Indonesian metal scene since their formation in 1995, becoming their nation’s biggest and most adored heavy band. Eben was present at the 2013 *Metal Hammer* Golden God Awards, where Burgerkill won the Metal As Fuck award for their amazing work in bringing Indonesian metal to the world stage. Eben was a beloved figurehead of the international metal scene. He will be dearly missed, and our thoughts are with his friends and family at this time.

THE HOT TOPIC

WHAT DOES THE RISE OF THE TALIBAN MEAN FOR AFGHANISTAN'S METAL MUSICIANS?

The 20-year US conflict may be over, but for Afghanistan's musicians the fight for survival is now more crucial than ever

WORDS: RICH HOBSON • LEAD PICTURE: TRAVIS BEARD

Sound Central are trying to get musicians out of Afghanistan

ON AUGUST 15, 2021, music in Afghanistan effectively became illegal. While no official decree had been passed, the return of Taliban rule after two decades of conflict precipitated mass panic. Instruments were buried or burned, advertisements featuring women were covered over and people attempted to evacuate en masse. All notions of progress were erased as the Taliban resumed control of Afghanistan after 20 years of conflict with the US, the central/south asian country itself having endured a four-decade cycle of war and occupation. Afghanistan's metal scene hadn't been active for some time, but the fact it existed at all was miraculous. "It was pretty punk," offers Travis Beard, an Australian expat who settled in Afghanistan in 2001. "Punk not in the genre sense, but because it forced everybody to be very DIY."

Assisted by expats like Travis who could source everything from equipment to rehearsal rooms and venues, a loose scene formed around local groups like Kabul Dreams, White Paper and District Unknown. "The scene was literally *underground*, not just as a cool name but as a necessity for safety," explains Sulleiman, a US-born musician who joined District Unknown while living in Afghanistan and later co-founded post-metal group Afreet. "There were armoured checkpoints and you'd need to be on a list to even be considered for entry, because the risks were too high."

This cautiousness proved to be well-founded; in 2014 a suicide bomb attack at the French Institute Of Culture killed several people during a theatre production. "2014 was a turning point," says ex-District Unknown vocalist and Afreet co-founder Yousef. "Nowhere would put on shows after the attack. Not long after, people started harassing me and other members of the band. A picture of us got spread on social media, saying we were influencing Afghan youths to listen to the devil's music."

The image ultimately got picked up by national news and the band were accused of freemasonry "because we were throwing devil horns," Sulleiman says frustratedly. While Sulleiman had returned to his native Denver the previous year, Yousef was left behind with the threat of harassment – or worse – hanging over him. Ultimately he decided to seek asylum in Europe, leaving everything behind. "I was kind of used to it," he admits. "My family left Afghanistan when I was young and moved around for a while; we moved back to Afghanistan from Uzbekistan in 2001. By the time I was 14 I had experienced so many different cultures and could speak five languages, so I just try to see the bright side in that."

Yousef ultimately obtained a residency permit in the UK with indefinite leave to remain, but even seven years on he still faces logistical hurdles as an Afghan refugee and waits to see if he will gain official residency status. Still, he is one of the lucky ones. Metal Sam (a pseudonym to protect his identity) is one of hundreds of Afghan-

"KABUL IS A DEAD CITY NOW AND MOST OF ITS MUSICIANS ARE IN HIDING"

TRAVIS BEARD PICTURE: DAVID GILL OTHERS: PRESS

District Unknown are largely regarded as the country's first metal band

Metal musicians need our help

Aussie expat Travis Beard: part of the Afghan metal scene

born musicians currently looking to escape the country. A member of black metal band Rig Veda, he faces severe punishment should his associations with the band become known. "Metal is my whole life," he says, resolutely. "I can't just give it up. We were one of the last bands still active in the country as of 2019, but the Taliban takeover has left us pessimistic. Kabul is a dead city now and most of its musicians are in hiding. People feel like they're in prison; I had to give up all my possessions and hide until I can get out of Afghanistan."

While charities like Girl With A Guitar and Sound Central have set up emergency fundraisers and scrambled to provide humanitarian support, the scale of the crisis is such that the issue will likely remain a concern for years to come. "The bottleneck is so congested that it can take forever to process people," Travis admits. "We've managed to raise $50,000 between our own efforts and an NGO, but realistically that will only help what, 25 musicians? And that's without considering their families."

Visibility remains a crucial factor in Afghanistan's ongoing crisis. Even though metal musicians make up a tiny microcosm of the overall refugee statistics, all discussions ultimately draw a spotlight to the threats faced by refugees and amplify their stories. To this end, the World Metal Congress have already hosted a panel event (featuring Travis, Sulleiman and Yosef) to discuss how Afghanistan's crisis impacts the wider world.

"Part of the mission of the World Metal Congress is to highlight issues that matter to the metal scenes globally," explains Dr. Lina Khatib, co-founder of WMC. "Crackdowns on freedom of expression and threats to the safety and wellbeing of artists should be a concern for everyone in any metal scene, regardless of whether someone is personally affected by them or not, as these are issues of human rights."

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10 THINGS WE LEARNED THIS MONTH

What's been blowing our tiny brains

TOOL ARE COMING BACK!
They hit our arenas in May 2022. Judging by Download 2019, it's gonna be epic.

SPIRITBOX ARE STARS
Their debut *Eternal Blue* has gone Top 20 in the UK and the US. You love to see it.

MACHINE GUN KELLY IS NOT COOL
The rapper-turned-pop-punk-artist slagged off Slipknot onstage during Chicago's Riot Fest. Unsurprisingly, it did not go down well.

...BUT COREY TAYLOR IS
He plays a radio DJ in horror anthology *Bad Candy*, out in time for Halloween!

Spiritbox: chart botherers!

ROB HALFORD IS ON TV
OK he's starring in insurance adverts, but who wouldn't want Rob beamed into their living room?

GHOST CONFIRM OUR SUSPICIONS
Besides announcing a US tour with Volbeat and Twin Temple for 2022, Papa and Sister Imperator had a 'Doom' call, in which she hinted she was his mother...

BRUCE DICKINSON IS WORKING ON A SOLO ALBUM
It'll be the first since 2005's *Tyranny Of Souls*. Come on, Bruce!

ANDY SERKIS KNOWS HIS METAL
In a video interview with IGN, he correctly guessed Venom Prison were a band – and not a symbiote.

BLOODSTOCK JUST GOT BIGGER!
As well as headliners Lamb Of God and Mercyful Fate, they've added Jinjer, Hatebreed, Sleep Token and more.

HEILUNG HAVE MADE MEAD
And their own beer. Skål!

Heilung: time to get a round in!

WHICH BEARD FROM HISTORY WOULD YOU HAVE?

He's Dream Theater's guitar wizard and prog metal's king of face foliage maintenance, but will your questions ruffle John Petrucci's whiskers?

WORDS: ALI COOPER • PICTURES: RAYON RICHARDS

IF YOU THOUGHT an extended break from touring cycles would afford Dream Theater's John Petrucci a hard-earned rest from crafting prog genius, you'd be wrong. Conjuring up a new solo album, the first Liquid Tension Experiment record in 22 years plus a new DT venture in the space of the pandemic, metal's riffmeister general is proving that there's no rest for the wicked. To celebrate this month's release of the prog maestros' lofty 15th effort, *A View From The Top Of The World*, we challenged you to interview the guitar master for us. Uncovering his secrets on epic beard maintenance, the challenges of eight-string guitars and the many feats of DT's career so far, here are the answers to your burning questions.

What made you want to write progressive metal?
@zephyrus1324
"It was something that came naturally to me because of the bands I was into when I was playing guitar. I was into metal and Iron Maiden and Metallica and stuff like that, but at the same time I was a huge Rush and Yes fan, plus Pink Floyd. When I would get together with my friends and we would write music, it would sort of come out that way, so it was a natural occurrence based on my influences."

Which album is rotating in your home now?
@Marches77765305
"None! In my home, as with probably most homes around the world, there's a lot of Netflix and Hulu and Disney+ going around so there's not a lot of albums rotating. It sounds obvious but since producing this new Dream Theater record, it was the only thing I was listening to over the past several months, I must have heard it 5,000 times! It's bizarre but a lot of people listen to music when they exercise, drive or hanging at home, you'd think I would but I don't."

Dream Theater: on top of the world

What beard oil do you use? Your beard is magnificent.
David Pacholok (Facebook)
"Well, thank you! I'll use this as a plug because there's a UK company called Captain Fawcett that makes men's grooming supplies, beard oils and balms, moustache wax and scissors and all that. I was a customer of theirs and we ended up making a connection through one of the people there that was a DT fan. They do signature products with a lot of different people, barbers, famous models, so I approached them like, 'Have you ever done that with a musician?' So we did, now I have a line of signature products called Nebula with a beard oil, balm and moustache wax. I'm wearing it right now and it looks and smells awesome!"

You have been a firm favourite with many guitarists over the years, but can you pinpoint the time where you reflected on your own playing and realised you were a good guitarist?
Chris Beattie (Facebook)
"I remember being a teenager and practising six hours a day, really getting into it and realising, 'Yeah, I want to

John Petrucci:
hirsuted and booted

“I’LL TAKE GANDALF’S BEARD. I’M GETTING THERE!”

do this as a career and go to Berklee College of Music in Boston like some of my heroes did.' It was somewhere in the teen years, maybe 15 years old, that I realised it was something I could do well and I loved to do and I was willing to sit there for hours like it was nothing. There's nothing else I had ever experienced in that way."

With the new album, did you find yourself writing using familiar techniques, or did you try and experiment with risks a bit more?
@VeganMerman
"A little bit of both. There's definitely something new for me on this record that I was completely unfamiliar with: I got my first eight-string guitar. Ernie Ball Music Man have an eight-string version of my guitar, the first eight-string that they've ever made and the first one I've ever played and used, so we wrote a song on the record with it and that was different. It didn't take long to get used to because it's a guitar based on one of my models called the Majesty, it comes in six- and seven-strings so that's adding one more string... what's one more string? Certain things are different about eight-strings – they have fan frets and slanted pick-ups and things but since it was a Majesty that I'm so used to, it felt like a natural extension of that. The guitar is absolutely beautiful!"

Given the low ratio of women to men (est. 4:96) at your shows, have you considered using the lack of any line for the ladies' restroom as a selling point in promoting your concerts?
Jo Fleischer (Facebook)
"That's funny! I'm not sure why it's like that. I just did my third guitar camp called John Petrucci's Guitar Universe and I have lots of guest instructors that come in. This was the first time my wife Rena came as a guest instructor – she's a guitar player from Meanstreak, which was an all-female thrash band, and she plays in Judas Priestess now. All the campers there except for two were male. We had discussions on why more women don't come to camps and concerts in this genre. There are tons of female players and drummers out there, why don't they come to shows? We've seen an increase in DT audiences lately but the ratio is still well off and I always wonder why. I'd love to see more women come to our shows!"

"Where did I drop those other two strings...?"

If you could have any beard in history, fictional or not, whose would it be?
Alasdair Belling (Facebook)
"I'll take Gandalf's beard, how's that? I'm getting there!"

What comes first when you write a new song? A riff, melody, rhythm, or all at once? How do you construct the rest of the track?
@ObiWan_2_3
"It depends on the song. As a guitar player, riffs usually come to me first but as a lyricist and just general songwriter, melodies are always swimming around in my head. In Dream Theater's case, it depends on the section of the song because some of these songs go on for a while and they're driven by a melodic idea, but for the most part, it's more the riffs or the motif on the guitar."

On the new DT song *The Alien*, the drums and bass sound more outstanding than the three previous albums. Any reason?
@DKeita8
"This is the first album we recorded in our own studio called DTHQ in Long Island, New York. I recorded my solo album *Terminal Velocity* in 2020 there, then recorded *LTE3* with Liquid Tension Experiment and DT went in there last October. It's thanks to the talents of our engineer Jimmy T Meslin and our mix engineer Andy Sneap, who's also in Judas Priest. It's a team effort of everybody's talents coming together. It sounds awesome! We're always pushing ourselves and each other to do better and find out how we can improve upon our sound and writing, so it's great to get that feedback from people, especially this far into our career."

There aren't many collaborations on Dream Theater songs. What's the best or strangest idea for a collaboration the band have had?
Kevin Tobin (Facebook)
"I'm not sure if you would call it a collaboration rather than a concerted effort, but one of the best things we did was having David Campbell arrange all the orchestration for that project. That's a two hour-plus piece of music and we had full orchestras and choirs, marching bands, you name it, and David arranged and recorded all that. In the studio, we had something like 700 tracks to mix and it was an unbelievable partnership in having him do that. It was mind-blowing and so musically satisfying to work with someone on his level."

"THERE ARE TONS OF FEMALE MUSICIANS. WHY DON'T THEY COME TO OUR SHOWS?!"

***A VIEW FROM THE TOP OF THE WORLD* IS OUT VIA INSIDEOUT ON OCTOBER 22**

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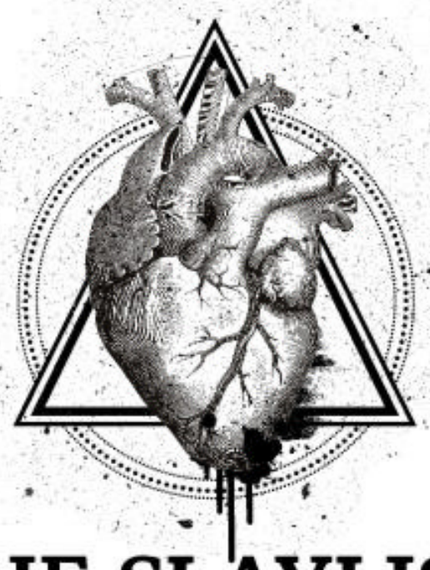

THE SLAYLIST

AARON WEAVER

Wolves In The Throne Room's bassist-drummer takes a trip through the realms of psy-trance, sacred music and death metal

WORDS: DOM LAWSON

Aaron Weaver has no limits when it comes to influences

"OUR RECORDS ARE deeply atmospheric, which means we create a space within the music that the listener can get lost in. On our new album, *Primordial Arcana*, there are many layers of guitars and synthesisers that meld together, but a careful ear could pick out individual sounds and sonic entities that have their own soul. The inspiration for these sounds come mostly from places in nature – certain mountains, rivers and expanses of forest that have embraced us over the years. Of course, we are inspired by many different styles of music and metal is our primary influence, but within the sonic architecture of *Primordial Arcana* one will hear sounds drawn from many genres and artists.

"**THE MOON LAY HIDDEN BENEATH A CLOUD** are a bizarre, psychedelic Austrian duo, criminally underappreciated but deeply influential in the underground. I love their use of sample looping to create trance-inducing soundscapes. We don't sample other artists, but I often warp our sounds in a similar way to create deep atmospheres.

"*The Black Album* was the first metal album I got into. I was 12 when I heard *Enter Sandman* on the radio, which introduced me to **METALLICA** and was a gateway into the world of metal. My first instrument was the bass and I remember going into the local music shop and asking how I could make my bass sound like Jason Newsted. The guy said, "Well, you probably need to get a bass that cost more than 100 bucks!" Since then, I've worked hard at getting a good bass guitar tone, and I referenced *Sad But True* a lot when mixing the new record. My quintessential metal drum sound comes from the swamps of Florida. Morrisound Studios produced so many classic death metal albums, but *Covenant* by **MORBID ANGEL** is my favourite. *Lion's Den* is so brutal, organic and precise. I mixed the kick drum on *Primordial Arcana* to sound like that record.

"Many of my mixing inspirations come from the world of electronic music. I'm a fan of early Goa trance, and songs like *Deep Jungle Walk* by the Israeli psy-trancer **ASTRIX**. I often reference music from outside metal that possesses certain qualities, like psychedelic layering and evolving soundscapes juxtaposed with primal, trance-inducing rhythms. *Chemz* is a new track by one of my favourite artists, the British visionary **BURIAL**. I cannot think of any other artist who does a better job of channelling pure emotion and feeling into music. This is music I feel in my heart. Even though WITTR are inspired by wild nature, Burial's omnipresent samples of rain connect me to his music in an elemental way.

"It might surprise some people but **OUTKAST**'s *ATLiens* is one of my main reference tracks in the studio. It has a *lot* of space in the mix. That's something I always strive for. It's a challenge, given the *many* layers of guitars and synthesisers that are used to create our atmospheric ambience.

"I love heavy, punishing drums, and **DIGITAL MYSTIKZ** come with some of the heaviest around. In the low end of the mix, it's always a challenge to make the sub-bass and kick drum sit correctly, so I often dissect bass-heavy tracks like *Enter Dimensions* to discover tricks to make it work.

"Many people say that they find our music to be meditative and I agree. Within the maelstrom of tremolo guitars and blastbeats, there's a space of calm and peacefulness that I actively cultivate. **CRAIG PRUESS** is one of my favourite producers of sacred music. On *Sacred Chants Of Shiva*, beautiful, lush and deep chanting and tones open up the third eye.

"In my house, **ULVER**'s *Kveldssanger* is always played around the Winter Solstice. When I hear songs like *Kveldsang* I can picture the dark, slow days in winter time, with candles and incense burning, a roaring fire in my woodstove, hot mulled cider and good food. Certainly it's been an inspiration for our acoustic passages. Classical music provides great inspiration to find creative ways to layer sounds. In this sphere of art **RICHARD WAGNER** is a favourite. *Der Ring Des Nibelungen* is mythic, grand, opulent and magical. This music is timeless.

LISTEN NOW Head to **tinyurl.com/WolvesSlaylist** to listen to Aaron's Slayist

"OUTKAST'S *ATLIENS* IS ONE OF MY MAIN REFERENCE TRACKS"

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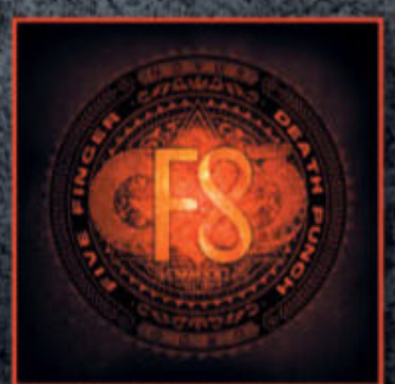

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Bad Wolves - N.A.T.I.O.N

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LIFE LESSONS

DANNY WORSNOP

What's the best way to hustle your way to stardom? The Asking Alexandria frontman and reformed hellraiser has some tips

WORDS: DANNII LEIVERS • PICTURES: DANNY WORSNOP

DANNY WORSNOP HAS done and seen it all. The frontman helped put British metalcore on the map in the late 00s with hellraisers Asking Alexandria, only to quit the band in 2015 then rejoin two years later. He's veered into debauched hard rock with his side-project We Are Harlot and launched a stripped-down country/blues solo career, and we've watched him live every one of his Sunset Strip fantasies before finally finding sobriety and happiness. Now, as Asking Alexandria's seventh album, *See What's On The Inside*, drops, he looks back at what he's learned during his rollercoaster career.

MY TEACHERS RECOGNISED MY POTENTIAL

"I think that's why they perhaps pushed me a little harder than other people. I think they saw people fucking around because they had nothing else to do and saw me fucking around because I was bored. They saw something in me and were on my ass because of it."

I WAS NEVER A METALHEAD

"I was a big Bon Jovi fan. I loved Bryan Adams, Aerosmith… Marc Cohn has always been an enormous favourite of mine. My grandfather loved singing the blues, so I gravitated towards that. I very much enjoyed Paramore when I was young. The only band I managed to talk people into being in when I was young was a Paramore cover band. We covered two songs, that was the extent of it."

PUT YOURSELF IN A POSITION WHERE LOSING IS NOT AN OPTION

"Ben [Bruce, Asking Alexandria guitarist] and I had come up with this beautiful plan: to form Asking Alexandria and move straight to America. We told the guys and their parents that we had meetings with record labels, a manager and a tour lined up. But none of that was true. We said that so everyone signed off on it. We got to America, and they were like, 'Where do we start?' and we're like… 'About that…' But moving to America put us in a position where we had to make it. We didn't have any money; we were living in a broken-down RV in a Walmart parking lot. We're supposed to say, morally, that we're not proud of what we did, but we think it's hilarious… because it worked out."

PLAYING NON-STOP METAL TOURS IN THE EARLY DAYS HELD US BACK CREATIVELY

"I think we would have progressed [more quickly to be] closer to where we are now. More in the rock direction and not so angsty and edgy. I think that's what we always wanted, but we didn't think we were able to. It's something that's true and honest to all of us and what we started music to do. I think those tours kept us in that box for longer than we would have organically been."

QUITTING ASKING ALEXANDRIA TO FOCUS ON WE ARE HARLOT PROVED I COULD DO IT ALONE

"I learned that I didn't need Asking Alexandria. As an individual songwriter and artist, I found I'm capable of doing this on my own, which gave me a lot of security in myself. I also learned how other people operate, because I've never worked with anyone else. It was an interesting lesson in how unique Asking's operating is. From the outside, it looked like a shitshow, but it's actually an incredibly well-run machine."

A COIN TOSS DETERMINED IF I WOULD RETURN TO ASKING ALEXANDRIA

"At first, I was only coming back to help out. At first, I wasn't even asked, 'Will you rejoin the band?' It was, 'Hey, we just fired Denis [Stoff, AA vocalist 2015-16], we have to tour and don't want to cancel. Will you come do it?' I don't even know if the guys know this, but I was in a bar and I tossed a coin! Ha ha! I texted Ben and said, 'I'm in.' I took my own crew, and I was on my own bus. We were together, but separate. I didn't want anyone to get ahead of themselves and be like, 'Danny's back', because I didn't know if that was the case, but it was only a couple of weeks in before I knew this was where I was supposed to be."

ITS OK TO TAKE TIME OFF

"From me going away [and rejoining Asking Alexandria], the biggest lesson for the band was an understanding of each other's limits. Over the years, people lost people and couldn't mourn or go to funerals. People missed children's birthdays, first steps – really important milestones. It was really detrimental to our mental stability. We've learned now that sometimes people need a bit of time. We were adamantly told, 'If you take time off, you're done, your career goes away nobody is going to still be here.' Bearing in mind, we only wanted a couple of weeks, maybe a month, off between tours after being on the road for three years straight, we were always told no. We don't need to work like that."

NOW, WE'RE IN CONTROL OF OUR OWN DESTINY

"As a band, we've learned Asking Alexandria isn't everything. We can and should all put our personal lives first. We didn't know it was OK before. Before, it was the be all and end all, our everything, our purpose. Now second is still really fucking high up on the priority list, I don't want anyone thinking that there's anything at all rocky in the band. There's not, but we have learned boundaries."

REAL FRIENDSHIP WILL OUTLAST ANYTHING YOU THROW AT IT

"It honestly didn't take long to get back into the groove again. In the studio, me and Ben got back into the flow on day one. I don't think we sat there for more than two hours before it was cruising again. We've written together for almost half our lives. In fact, in three years, half of my life will have been spent with Ben Bruce."

I WILL NEVER REVEAL THE MEANINGS BEHIND SOME OF MY LYRICS

"I write in session as I'm recording, just me and my producer, and if I didn't need him to push the buttons, I'd do it completely by myself. I don't like writing in front of people because I do get very personal. It takes me a long time to even talk about what the

"WE TOLD THE GUYS WE HAD A TOUR LINED UP. IT WASN'T TRUE"

Asking Alexandria is Danny's number two priority now

Danny: more spontaneous but less insane is the goal

"WHEN I HAD VOICE TROUBLE I REACHED OUT TO M SHADOWS"

songs are about and not right away. Ben's got this new thing where as soon as I'm done he says, 'Send me the lyrics, I want to read them.' I used to be very protective over it, like, 'I'm not comfortable with what I wrote yet, you've got to give me a minute.' Now I send them right away because I'm trying to kick myself out of my comfort zone. There are some lyrics that I've still never talked about, even after being asked by the guys in the band; I'm just like, 'You don't need to know about that.'"

BUT SOMETIMES GOOD SONGS DON'T HAVE TO MEAN ANYTHING

"Before [third album] *From Death To Destiny*, with the exception of *Someone, Somewhere* [from second album *Reckless & Relentless*], all of the lyrics were just from little notepads where I wrote lyrics as I came up with them. I pieced them together, none of the songs mean anything. They're all just groups of lines that rhymed or that sounded cool at the time. If you read through them, they're not cohesive, they jump between so many things. Ultimately, though, it doesn't matter what I wrote them about, it's what they mean to the listener."

I ADMIT I USED TO BE A HANDFUL – BUT A BIT OF SPONTANEITY IS GOOD FOR YOU

"I look back at bits of [my behaviour] and cringe, but realistically, and this goes back to seeing how other people operate, I wasn't that bad. I was a handful, but I don't think I was ever a nightmare. I was stressful [to be around] because I was unpredictable, very spontaneous, but honestly, I'm trying to capture a bit of that back into my life because I feel like I've lost a lot of my spontaneity. I just need to try and have it be a little less… insane."

EVERYTHING YOU DO TO YOUR BODY WILL AFFECT IT THE NEXT DAY

"I've asked advice far too few times in my career. I think the only person I've ever reached out to was [Avenged Sevenfold singer, M] Shadows when I was having some trouble with my voice. I was like, 'You're so consistent and you have infinitely more knowledge than me, is there anything you can do to help?' He said two things: water all the time. Not just when you're onstage – all the time. And whatever I do today isn't going to affect my singing today, it'll affect it tomorrow. It's very much about staying ahead of myself."

ASKING ALEXANDRIA'S NEW ALBUM, *SEE WHAT'S ON THE INSIDE*, IS OUT NOW VIA BETTER NOISE MUSIC

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VENOM PRISON

Anxiety, incarceration, uprooting racism and sexism – extreme metal's rising stars are tackling the big topics head on

WORDS: RICH HOBSON

WITH THEIR FIRST two albums, Venom Prison injected fresh vitality into the British extreme metal scene. The Anglo-Russian five-piece's fusion of hardcore vitality and visceral death metal may have made them darlings of the underground, but the two new tracks included amid the re-recordings of earlier material on last year's *Primeval* hinted towards an ambitious expansion in style as it introduced vocal melodies into their sound for the first time. We caught up with vocalist Larissa Stupar to find out what their in-progress third studio album holds…

Last year you put out *Primeval*, a re-recording of your first demo and EP. Would you have still revisited that material if you'd been able to just go straight in with writing, recording and touring album #3?
Larissa: "We'd planned to do it for a while – we actually recorded *Primeval* in December 2019. We wanted to revisit our roots and give the songs that were on that demo and EP the production they deserve. The demo was originally done in our living room and the EP then made with money that was left over."

What attracted you to working with Scott Atkins on this new record?
"We're big fans of [Atkins' late 90s/early 00s proto-metalcore band] Stampin' Ground so we've wanted to work with him for years. Scott was a huge help in figuring out which parts needed to be repeated, which were too good to only use once. He refined our sound and made it less chaotic – you can expect to hear every instrument and element really well, which I think we really needed."

With so long spent working on the record, how much has it evolved from where you started writing it?
"We've always had a vision for this record. The only thing that changed is that Ben [Thomas] had some electronic bits on his laptop, but his hard drive was corrupted and we couldn't use any of it! We had to rewrite it all but he was able to refine it and make it better."

Has playing bigger stages and events factored at all in the writing process?
"I definitely think it played a part in writing the songs. But also, we just feel more comfortable with each record we write, in who we are as musicians. We want to take steps forward, even if sometimes we worry it's going to be hard and we might not pull it off."

What lyrical themes are you exploring this time?
"The new record will touch on incarceration a lot. Some of it is inspired by the fact we can't walk around as freely as we used to, but also everything happening in the outside world with the BLM protests in America, being able to dive into the racism that our societies are facing as well as other elements of marginalisation that play into incarceration in a vicious cycle. The only way to break the cycle is to tear up the roots of racism, sexism and misogyny. That's the main point of the album, but I also like to pick up personal things, like we've lost family members over the past few years and there are elements of depression and anxiety in there too."

Stylistically, your music bridges scenes like punk, hardcore and death metal. Do you find yourselves pulled in one particular direction when it comes to writing, or do you see it as an aim to strike a balance?
"We like to see where the songs take us. We've never felt like we wanted to fit into a certain box – we take all the influences we have and mix them together, because we've each got different tastes in music so it makes sense to take different approaches."

What do you hope fans take away from this new record?
"We've only been a band for six years, but we've grown up a lot in that time and it shows in our music. I really hope people take that away from this album. We don't always want to play one kind of music – we're doing as much as we can, in the way we want to." H

VENOM PRISON'S THIRD ALBUM IS EXPECTED IN EARLY 2022

Larissa Stupar: not singing about dragons any time soon

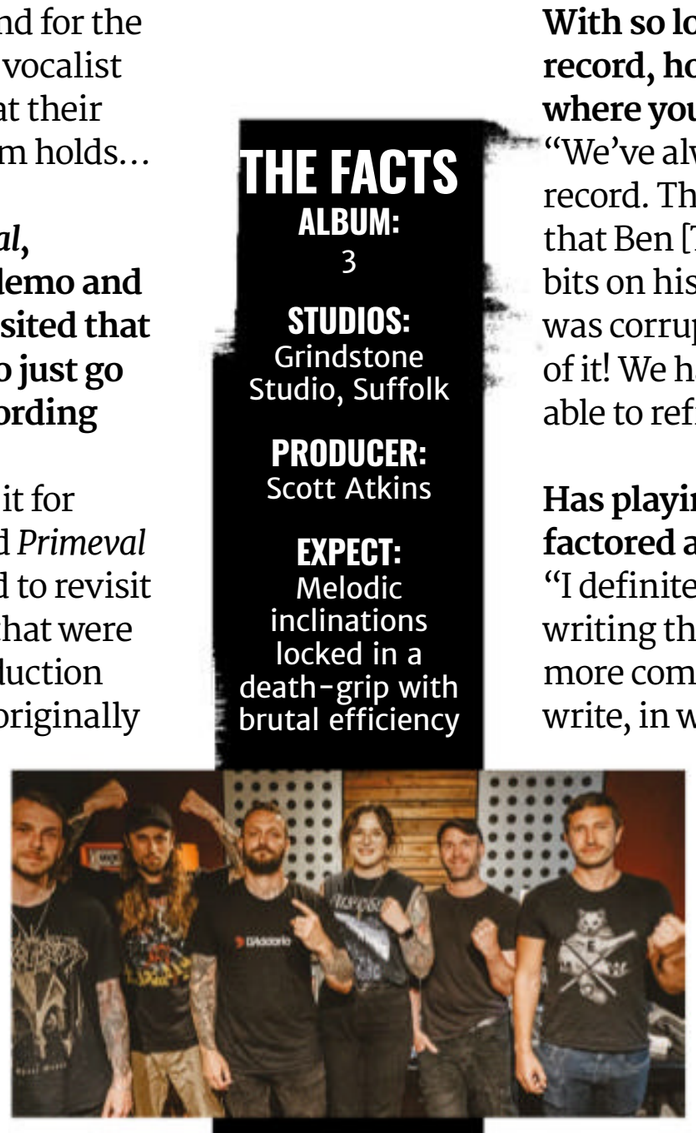
THE FACTS

ALBUM:
3

STUDIOS:
Grindstone Studio, Suffolk

PRODUCER:
Scott Atkins

EXPECT:
Melodic inclinations locked in a death-grip with brutal efficiency



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TOUCH OF EVIL

WARLOCK

How Doro Pesch's original band Warlock made an occult-metal classic, with a little help from a restless spirit and a superstar drummer

WORDS: DOM LAWSON

BY 1987, HEAVY metal had firmly established its relationship with the occult. From Black Sabbath to Venom and beyond, the dark side was ripe for plundering. The emergence of the thrash, death and black metal movements was conjuring all manner of blasphemous and unsettling new music, and censorious bell-ends the world over were routinely getting their collective undergarments in a twist. It was, it has to be said, great fun.

Among the less-celebrated contributors to metal's malevolent evolution were German upstarts Warlock. Led by Doro Pesch, the melodic speed metal crew had steadily built a reputation in Europe, releasing three well-received albums and accruing a sizeable, dedicated following. The band's debut, *Burning The Witches*, certainly focused on occult themes, but it would be their fourth album and major label breakthrough, 1987's *Triumph And Agony*, that would place Doro in the heart of some apparently genuine supernatural mischief.

"I went to New York City to write the record, with our producer Joel Balin. He was older than me but we hit it off right away, and he showed me all the clubs and it was awesome. One night he asked if I wanted to go another club, but I really don't drink much, and I said maybe we could jam a little bit instead? So we went to his place, and had a jam, and *then* he asked me if I'd ever played with a ouija board."

Doro cheerfully admits that, as a teenager, she was instinctively curious and fascinated with anything that seemed dark or spooky. Given the opportunity to dabble with the occult in the company of her new creative partner, she could hardly resist.

"I'd heard about it, but I'd never done it. It was totally banned in Germany at that time, and for good reason I would say! Ha ha!" she grins. "We played it every single night and all kinds of shit happened. The apartment nearly burned down. One night, suddenly, the ouija board said 'piano'. So I asked Joey to ask the spirit to *play* something on the piano. He was reluctant but he did, and it all felt spookier and spookier. Then, suddenly, there was a guitar hanging on the wall, and out came this little chord! I totally freaked out. I was running out of the apartment, screaming! Ha ha! I had to move out of the apartment. It was full of weird energy and I couldn't sleep there anymore!"

From that moment, Doro drew a line in the sand and vowed to have no further attempts to contact the spirit realm. However, there was still a heavy metal album to be made, and her hair-raising brush with ghostly forces would inevitably have an impact on *Triumph And Agony*. One of the album's heaviest and most intense songs, *Touch Of Evil*, tells the tale of some unnamed and possibly undead villain, lurking in the shadows with bloody murder on his mind.

"Yes, it was influenced by the ouija board, that whole experience," Doro notes. "How could it not be? It was just so metal! Ha ha! So we had the demons in *Metal Tango*, we had *Touch Of Evil*, we had the magic of the Warlock, it was *all* on the darker side. I changed my mind about that stuff after *Triumph And Agony*, and became more positive, with positive energy, but back then I was flirting with that stuff. We wanted the record to be fucking heavy, you know?"

Triumph And Agony is an album full of gleaming, bombastic metal anthems, ranging from singalong opener (and hit single) *All We Are* through to the ultimate tear-jerker, power ballad *Für Immer*. For two specific reasons, however, *Touch Of Evil* stands out as easily the most thunderous and unstoppable song on the whole record. Firstly, Doro absolutely screams her head off, particularly toward the end of the track, when she sounds genuinely possessed buy something unpleasant.

"I wanted to write something really, really powerful. We were writing it and I felt that I really wanted to scream my heart out, really belt it out like never before. Making the track was so good, because I didn't feel any pressure. The record company had heard the demos and they loved it all, and no one was asking us to be radio-friendly, like they had on previous albums. So we could just do whatever we wanted and screaming like a maniac felt right!"

Meanwhile, in the song's engine room, a certified legend of hard rock was spinning sticks and kicking up one hell of a racket. As Doro explains, it was the start of a recording session she would never forget.

THE FACTS

RELEASED:
1987

ALBUM:
Triumph And Agony

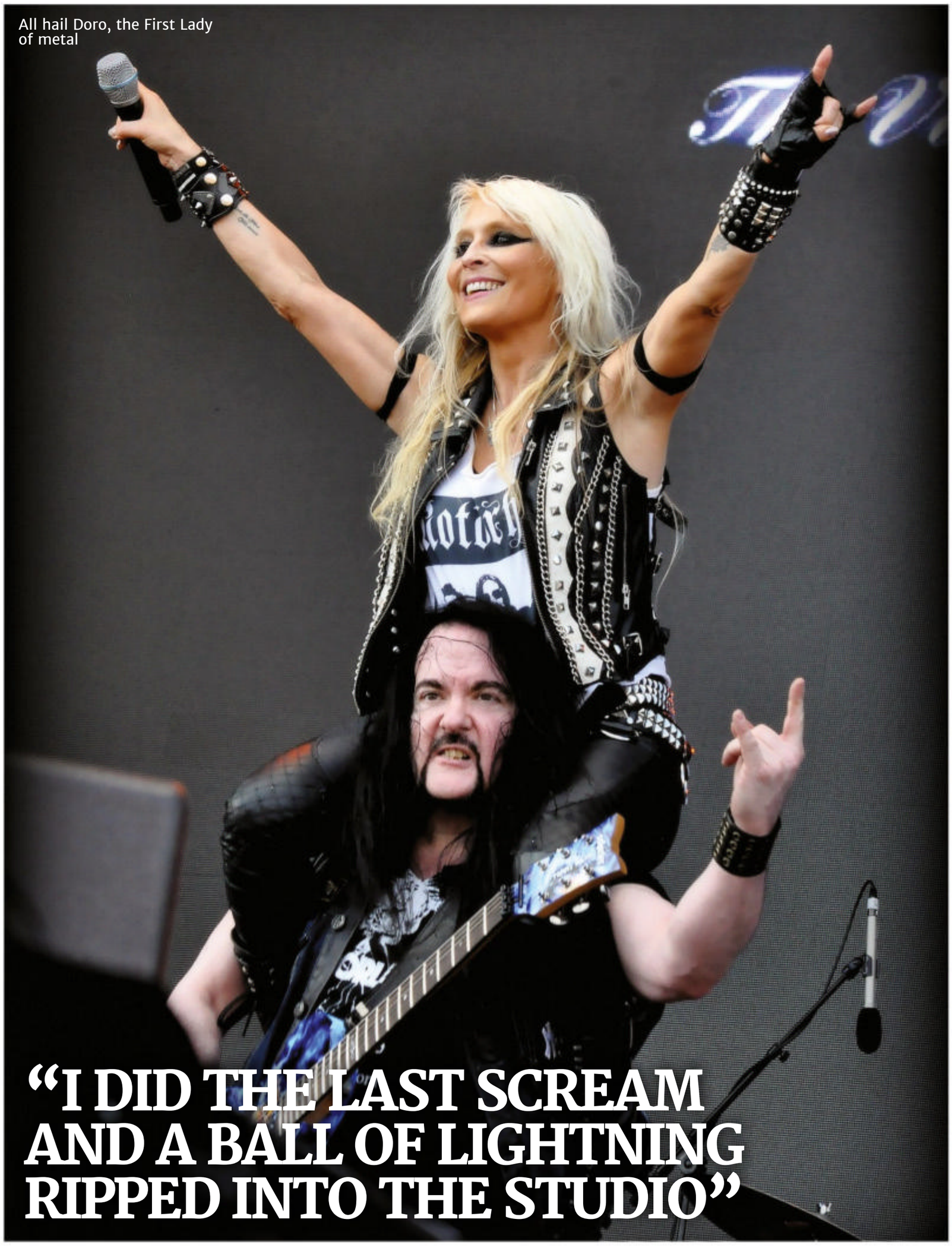
PERSONNEL:
Doro Pesch (vocals), Niko Arvanitis (guitar), Tommy Bolan (guitar), Tommy Henriksen (bass), Cozy Powell (drums)

HIGHEST CHART POSITION:
N/A

FRANK HEMPEL/GETTY

Doro had a little bit of help from the other side

“WE USED A OUIJA BOARD EVERY NIGHT AND ALL KINDS OF SHIT HAPPENED”



All hail Doro, the First Lady of metal

"I DID THE LAST SCREAM AND A BALL OF LIGHTNING RIPPED INTO THE STUDIO"

"I told my manager, 'We have this song, *Touch Of Evil*, and I think it's really heavy, really mean and dark and evil, so I need really powerful players on it, so I can really scream my ass off!'" she recalls. "He said, 'I have somebody in mind!' He wouldn't tell me who it was, it was a surprise, and the next morning I came into the studio at 11, and to my surprise it was Cozy Powell! He said, 'I hear you need some power!' I said, 'Yeah, some real manly power!' Ha ha!"

Best known as the powerhouse behind Rainbow, most notably during Ronnie James Dio's tenure with the band and classic albums *Rising* and *Long Live Rock 'N' Roll*, Cozy Powell (who passed away in 1998) was the perfect man for this job. Doro admits she was ever-so-slightly starstruck, but that the subsequent session surpassed all expectations.

"Cozy, he played *Touch Of Evil* and we all got scared!" Doro laughs. "When he played, the room was shaking and it went straight into your heart. It was like a rollercoaster, pinning you back in your seat. He was really nice too, really polite! I wish we'd had a video camera at the time. He was the best drummer I've ever seen in the flesh."

With Cozy's drums committed to tape, Doro set about delivering the wild and extreme vocal performance that she felt was necessary to make *Touch Of Evil* truly, you know, *evil*. Unfortunately, it turns out that you sometimes get exactly what you ask for.

"I went into my recording room to do the vocals. It had a tiny little window, so you could always see if it was daylight or night outside. I work best at night, so I was recording *Touch Of Evil* and really screaming my ass off, over and over. The headphones were always blowing up, because I had it playing so loud. But when I did the last scream that I do in that song, and it's an insane scream, suddenly a ball of lightning ripped into the studio through the window. It came in, went around the room, and went back out. I was standing in the middle and it didn't hit me, thank god, because everybody said I would've died if it had. Of course, then everybody got *really* scared. The recording was so intense and powerful. Like, 'What did we *do*?' Ha ha!

"When we came back to the studio, everybody was afraid to listen to it again, in case something else blew up! But the take was a keeper. When we played *T&A* live for the first time in its entirety, I thought that opening with *Touch of Evil* is a good idea because it sets the right mood!"

Released in September 1987, *Triumph And Agony* was a huge success for Warlock, not least due to videos for *All We Are* and *Für Immer* securing regular rotation on then flourishing MTV. Two years later, Warlock would have to relinquish their name in a legal battle with a former manager, but Doro began performing under her own name and has barely paused for breath since; deftly weathering the 90s with dignity intact, and now firmly back at the forefront of the old-school metal world. *Triumph And Agony* remains her most beloved album, however, and in 2017 Doro and her band began to perform the record in its entirety for the first time, in celebration of its 30th anniversary. Captured at shows at Sweden Rock Festival in 2017 and in Spain the following year, new album *Triumph And Agony – Live* brings a new level of power to those classic songs, *Touch Of Evil* (now promoted to show opener!) included.

"Sweden Rock was the very first show for the anniversary," Doro concludes. "Everything seemed perfect. It felt like it all happened yesterday, not way back in 1987. There's so much energy in the songs, especially things like *Touch Of Evil*. We know the album has a special place in the hearts of the diehard fans. *Triumph And Agony* was the stepping stone to something great. Everything fell into place. It was a great time for metal, with *Headbangers Ball* on TV and so many great bands around. But don't forget that metal is in great shape now, too!"

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YOUR SHOUT

LET THE KARDASHIANS REP CANNIBAL CORPSE

And other controversial opinions you shared with us this month

RIP Eben. Taken from us way, way too soon

STILL OUR #1

I was alarmed at the lack of significant Joey Jordison coverage in your issue out in August – two pages just didn't seem enough at all. I was very relieved to see that Joey was given the full treatment in the following month's magazine. Thank you, *Metal Hammer*!

George Williams (email)

There was never any doubt that we'd try to do Joey's legacy justice – we just needed to make sure we had the time and space to do it properly!

EBEN FOREVER

Burgerkill were the first Indonesian metal band I ever heard and it was thanks to *Metal Hammer*. I'm so heartbroken that Eben has been taken from us so young. Where's the justice in that?

Daniel Brooks (email)

We're totally shocked by the news of Eben's passing and, truth be told, are still trying to wrap our heads around it all. It's been a hard year for losing metal heroes.

REST IN POWER

Between Joey, Alexi Laiho and now Eben from Burgerkill, we really do need to understand that life is fleeting. At least all three of those great men taught us to live life to the fullest! Metal forever!

Jose Santin (Facebook)

We couldn't agree more. Losing musicians we look up to is hard, and indeed a sobering reminder of how we can't count on our tomorrows. Look after yourselves, everyone.

Gojira dropped one of the year's best albums (no surprise there, mind)

HUNS N' POSERS

Who cares if Kourtney Kardashian wears a Cannibal Corpse t-shirt? What difference does it make to anyone? Maybe if more bands actually made merchandise that fit women their designs wouldn't end up in high street fashion shops.

Olivia Wilsen (Facebook)

In terms of the issues the metal scene is facing in 2021, someone wearing a t-shirt of a legendary band is pretty far down our worries list.

SONS OF ANARCHY

Lars Ulrich's kids being old enough to form a band makes me feel absolutely ancient. I remember *The Black Album* fan arguments like they were yesterday!

Brian Seeman (Facebook)

That's probably because they were yesterday, to be fair – people still debate that album as much as ever. Lars's *grandkids* will start playing instruments before we get over this one…

TWENTY TWENTY-FUN

Iron Maiden, Gojira, Rivers Of Nihil, Carcass, At The Gates, Cannibal Corpse… this is one of the best years for metal I can remember in a long time! Dare

#TWEETS

What's a "bell end" I never heard that expression
Dino Cazares, Fear Factory
(@DinoCazares)

Long, long ago, some weirdo said, "What if I pick these beans, then roast them, then grind them all up, then pour hot water through the whole mess and just, I don't know, drink it" and now I'm addicted to it.
Aaron Pauley, Of Mice & Men
(@aaronpauley)

All of @ITHACA BAND: in the studio, tracking an album and working extremely hard. Me: at the top of the street, waiting for *Pokémon Shield* to be delivered
Djamila Yasmin, Ithaca
(@djamilayasmin)

Next year this time we will be close to wrapping up the American leg of #TheStadiumTour with the mighty @DefLeppard. Living a year into the future but thinking about it everyday. Anybody else excited?
Nikki Sixx, Mötley Crüe
(@NikkiSixx)

PRESS X3

Limp Bizkit: they make the haters wanna break stuff

I say, it was worth the wait given how little was going on last year?
Richie Hubbart (Facebook)

We think last year had plenty to say for itself, but yes, 2021 is on another level entirely. You didn't even mention Employed To Serve, Spiritbox, Backxwash, Beartooth, Jinjer, Alien Weaponry… oh dear we've gone cross-eyed.

SPOOK WHO'S TALKING

Are we allowed to get excited about Halloween yet? I know it's September but I've been spinning the new Ice Nine Kills stuff and it's got me in the mood.
James Rembert (Facebook)

Well, James, not only are we excited for Halloween all year round, but by the time people read this in the mag it'll be October, so we'd be sick with disgust if you *weren't* getting the orange tablecloth out by now.

DON'T SLEEP ON THIS

I'm not seeing nearly enough hype from *Metal Hammer* about Sleep Token! One of the best young bands in the world right now, where's the love, *Metal Hammer*?
Alice Spooner (Facebook)

Well, they don't do interviews (yet?), so features are tricky, but musically? Live? We're *allllllll* over it. And there'll be plenty more Sleep Token love to come, trust us.

STIFF BIZKIT

Why the fuck do *Metal Hammer* have a hard-on for Limp Bizkit again? I feel like I see photos of Fred Durst all over your social media every single week now. Is it 2001?
Clay David Smith (Facebook)

Limp Bizkit are fucking great and bashing them went out of fashion about 10 years ago. Come on, keep up, Clay!

THE BIG DEBATE

Last month, Bruce Dickinson explained his comments on Brexit in an interview with *Classic Rock*. The Maiden frontman voted Leave, but has been dismayed by the UK government's failure to make sure the music industry is looked after now that we've left the EU.

HE SAID

"It's not us I'm concerned about, it's the younger bands who don't have the time to go through all the paperwork and all the nonsense and there should be a way of streamlining those things for all performers."

YOU SAID

I get what he is saying, but he needs to understand that all that he is complaining about is a consequence of what he voted for and he has to live with that. Can't have your cake and eat it all the time in life.
Karl Cranny (Facebook)

Surely someone, however they voted to start with, putting pressure on the government to support young musicians in this situation is a good thing?
Jess Pepday (Facebook)

He should probably just own the fact he supported a right-wing conjob that's resulted in artists having to jump through hoops to tour. As well as the myriad negative outcomes that hit the non-wealthy hardest.
David Winters (Facebook)

You just have to look at the drop in dates for upcoming tours. European legs don't seem to have lost many tour dates, whilst the UK leg now seems to just consist of four or five dates. The usual places covered – London, Glasgow and Cardiff.
Daniel Beckett (Facebook)

JOIN THE BIG DEBATE AT FACEBOOK.COM/METALHAMMERREADERS

HAMMER STEREO

What's been blowing our office speakers

TRIVIUM
In The Court Of The Dragon
"Heavy metal's most on-form band have produced another stunner!"
MERLIN ALDERSLADE
EDITOR

MASTODON
Hushed And Grim
"A heart-rending, double-length masterpiece"
ELEANOR GOODMAN
DEPUTY EDITOR

DIABLO SWING ORCHESTRA
Swagger & Stroll Down The Rabbit Hole
"Rampages with more joy than is possible with a rational mind"
JONATHAN SELZER
REVIEWS EDITOR

SPIRITBOX
Eternal Blue
"Absolutely stunning debut. I've had it on loop for days"
VANESSA THORPE
PRODUCTION EDITOR

SPIRITBOX
Eternal Blue
"Believe the hype"
LOUISE BROCK
ART EDITOR

GHOST BATH
Self Loather
"Proof that post-BM is a long way from running out of steam"
DAVE EVERLEY
FREELANCE NEWS EDITOR

NEW NOISE

WITCH FEVER

Music industry misogynists, the church, Boris Johnson – Britain's most in-your-face new band have everyone in their sights

WORDS: ELIZABETH SCARLETT • PICTURE: DEBBIE ELLIS

"FUCK THE PATRIARCHY, fuck Boris Johnson, and buy our record!" declares Witch Fever singer Amy Walpole with the ferocity of someone with zero interest in holding back.

In a male-dominated world that at times appears unchanging in its treatment and perception of women, conversations on female empowerment and equality can often feel like a tiresome, over-trodden road with no end destination. For female-identifying or non-binary musicians, these repetitive discussions can exist as part of their very own Groundhog Day, stuck in a loop of reliving personal experiences, burdened with educating the masses about a reality that so many of us live.

Witch Fever are out to break that loop. The Manchester band are furious, scabrously funny and unapologetically in-your-face. "*But get out of my cunt, I'll fucking eat you alive/Tear your bones head to toe just to see what's inside*," howls Amy on recent single In Birth, a fearsome slap-down that mixes up grunge, post-punk and doomy, Sabbath-inspired riffs. These self-proclaimed "underdogs" are intent on pulling the rug out from beneath the feet of misogynists, but they're having fun while they're doing it.

"I think that's the main thing, figuring out a way to express our anger about these issues and talk about them in a way that's empowering" says Alex. "We want to come across as positive."

"First and foremost we're musicians," adds Alex, "and all we wanna do is play some songs and talk about what's important to us."

Witch Fever formed five years ago when Amy, bassist Alex Thompson and guitarist Alisha Yarwood met through mutual friends, with drummer Annabelle Joyce joining the following year. The four of them bonded over shared ideologies of intersectional feminism, fighting for LGBTQ+ spaces, and a love of a good droptuned riff.

The band's debut EP, *Reincarnate* – released via Music For Nations, the iconic British label that's currently home to Bury Tomorrow, Wardruna and Killswitch Engage – crackles with a defiant, raised-middle-finger mix of anarchy and optimism. While the inspiration for much of Witch Fever's subject matter comes from a negative place, their music remodels that anger into empowerment and self-liberation.

"[The track] *Reincarnate* started as a break-up song, but it now means to me the idea of reclaiming yourself, your body, and being empowered by that," says Alex. "Knowing that you're worthwhile and that you don't deserve to take any shit."

Another track, *Bully Boy*, challenges the way a male God is used to control people in patriarchal systems. It's a weighty topic that stems from Amy's own personal experiences of being raised within the Charismatic Christian Church, a branch of Christianity centred around the concept of the Holy Spirit and the idea of speaking in tongues.

"A lot of my lyrics are about dealing with the fact that for 16 years, I had gone to a place every Sunday that had taught me about what I was meant to do, what life was about, and also how I should act as a woman and how my body and sex is shameful," says Amy. "And that's really, really harmful."

The singer frequently uses that upbringing as lyrical inspiration, turning biblical motifs on their heads as way of refuting the church's misogynistic teachings. But it's intertwined with her love of gothic literature and horror – hence the band's name, inspired by the Salem Witch Trials of the 1600s, which were used to oppress, diminish and ultimately kill women.

"If we were alive during the Salem witch trials, we would have been killed," says Alex. "The idea of a woman harnessing power can be seen as something evil."

Elsewhere, the song *Abject* addresses head-on the sexism the band have endured at live shows – an attitude that still prevails even now. "When I was writing it, I was thinking about being onstage and when you can literally see men's eyes light up in weird fucking ways," explains Amy. "When they're looking at me like a fucking slab of meat."

Changing the mindset of people who define non-male artists primarily by their identity and appearance rather than simply as musicians who are there to play their songs is an ongoing battle, but it's one Witch Fever are ready to have. They know the best way to go about it is via a bunch of killer songs, hefty riffs and a take-no-shit attitude that shoves it down the throat of anyone who may disapprove.

"I think ultimately, based on the fact that even by just existing we get such a strong reaction, clearly we need to keep on doing what we're doing." H

***REINCARNATE* IS OUT NOW VIA MUSIC FOR NATIONS**

IN SHORT

SOUNDS LIKE:
Riot Grrrl reborn for the 21st century

FOR FANS OF:
Nirvana, Bikini Kill, Black Sabbath

LISTEN TO:
In Birth

Witch Fever: pissing off misogynists everywhere. Excellent stuff

"IF WE WERE ALIVE DURING THE SALEM WITCH TRIALS, WE WOULD HAVE BEEN KILLED"

NEW NOISE

BLODET

Former instrumentalists find their voice, and harness a newfound sense of power

WORDS: ALEX DELLER • PICTURE: PATRIK NORBLAD

BLODET'S SECOND RELEASE sees them swelling their ranks while distilling their sound into something infinitely more potent. Drawing from post-rock, post-metal, folk and angular math-rock, the Swedish sextet offer a masterclass in cinematic expanse and carefully wrought tension. That it sounds so effortless, though, is the result of painstaking hard work, as bassist Dennis Fahlgren explains.

"I think there were maybe three or four earlier versions of each song," he says. "It's hard on the band, when you think you have a finished song and someone – often me – says, 'This isn't good enough.'"

Given their relentless quest for perfection it seems miraculous that one fundamental change – the addition of singer Hilda Heller – proved reasonably simple. "We sent her a rehearsal take of *The River* and four or five days later she sent back a version with her singing," says Dennis. "As soon as I heard it I was like, 'Yep, this is our new singer.' It was hand in glove, instantly."

While this was a big step for Blodet, it was arguably an even bigger shift for Hilda. "I had a solo project before," she says. "I was the one who decided everything and had the final say, so I was a bit nervous about that. But I felt like my ideas married well with theirs, and it's also given me a new way of writing – it almost comes from a trance-like state. In the past I wrote lyrics that were dark and almost a bit depressing, [with Blodet] I wanted to write something more inspirational and positive."

Dennis suggests *The Vision* serves as a transitional phase for Blodet – a pupal stage between their instrumental days and where they are now. "I never set out to play a certain genre of music," he says. "The main idea was about mood and suspense. Being without limits – that was the goal." H

IN SHORT

SOUNDS LIKE:
Ambitious cinematic heaviness with scant regard for genres or boundaries

FOR FANS OF:
Rodan, Talk Talk, Year Of No Light

LISTEN TO:
The River

***VISION* IS OUT NOW VIA CHURCH ROAD**

DANA DENTATA

Catharsis and empowerment set to an exhilarating, genre-mashing soundtrack

WORDS: DANNII LEIVERS • PICTURE: AMINA GOLD

LAST YEAR, DANA Dentata violently killed off her demons. During her 20-minute performance art piece, *The Resurrection Of Dana Dentata*, a group of fallen angels, led by Dana, turn on a horned companion and disembowel him. The image, she explains, was a way to process and move on from "shitty men and toxic people" who had emotionally, physically and sexually abused her for more than 15 years.

"I feel like it's important for me to be open and define what I'm talking about," says the Canadian-born singer. "The only reason we don't do that is because of shame, and all that does is prevent us from progressing."

Those themes of rebirth and taking back control are at the heart of Dana's empowering debut album, *Pantychrist*, which sees her rap, sing and scream over horror-inspired beats, thrash and industrial metal. It's a sound in thrall to everything from the New Wave Of British Heavy Metal, to Insane Clown Posse-style hip hop and sultry pop. The new songs, she says, were written during a "spiritual awakening", which helped her understand her traumatic past. "When you are reactionary, you're still a slave to what has repressed you," she says. "The most beautiful flowers grow from the deepest, darkest mud." H

IN SHORT

SOUNDS LIKE:
Visually extreme performance art, operating in the shadows of metal and hip hop

FOR FANS OF:
Nine Inch Nails, Ghostemane, Mimi Barks

LISTEN TO:
Apology

***PANTYCHRIST* IS OUT NOW VIA ROADRUNNER**

ONE STEP CLOSER

Explosive emotional outburst from melodic-hardcore newcomers

WORDS: RICH HOBSON

IN SHORT

SOUNDS LIKE:
Searing emotional intensity set to an explosive melodic hardcore gallop

FOR FANS OF:
Touché Amoré, Defeater, Converge

LISTEN TO:
Lead to Gray

PENNSYLVANIAN HARDCORE NEWCOMERS One Step Closer have been shaped by their hometown of Wilkes-Barre, for better or worse. "It's a weird, depressing place," admits frontman Ryan Savitski. "You have to be creative with what you've got because there's nothing else really around."

Aside from a bunch of great hardcore bands, that is. Turned on to the scene by watching a secret show by local legends Title Fight, Ryan was galvanised into forming his own band aged 12. "Title Fight were on Warped Tour so couldn't officially play any other shows" he explains. "So they played under the name 'Western Haikus', along with Cold World, Bad Seed and Dead End Path. It was a crazy bill, and really emotional because the show was a benefit for a friend of theirs who'd passed away."

Many years (and bands) later, One Step Closer continued the trend for turning adversity into positive energy, particularly when their tour with hardcore heroes Turnstile was cut short in March 2020. "I started getting calls saying Trump was imposing a travel ban," Ryan says. "We got home with no idea when we'd tour again and it was like getting hit by a tidal wave of emotions about home we'd tried to avoid."

Rather than fall into depression, the band funnelled their frustrations into debut record *This Place You Know*, fusing hardcore energy and emotional intensity. "It's all about capturing those feelings, this sense that we had grown beyond this place that was suffocating us," he says, resolutely. "It's an escape."

***THIS PLACE YOU KNOW* IS OUT NOW VIA RUN FOR COVER**

COGNIZANCE

UK tech-death scene gets a kick up the jazz-hole

WORDS: DOM LAWSON

IN SHORT

SOUNDS LIKE:
Precise and destructive tech-death with tons of imagination

FOR FANS OF:
Psycroptic, Decapitated, Archspire

LISTEN TO:
Syntheticus II - Refuge

TECHNICALLY DAZZLING AND laudably prolific, Cognizance have become increasingly prominent in the UK death metal scene over the last decade. The Leeds crew's debut album, *Malignant Dominion* (2019), was widely hailed as a boss-level triumph, and its follow-up, *Upheaval*, is set to repeat the trick. According to bassist Chris Binns, Cognizance have spent lockdown honing and expanding their sound.

"When we started writing it, Alex [Baillie, guitarist] and I wanted to take it in a more progressive direction, with a lot more melody, less riffing and more chord work. But Henry [Pryce, vocals], likes his straight death metal, rapid and aggressive, so it's all in there. Alex has all his jazz fusion influences, so we even used a little bit of that as well."

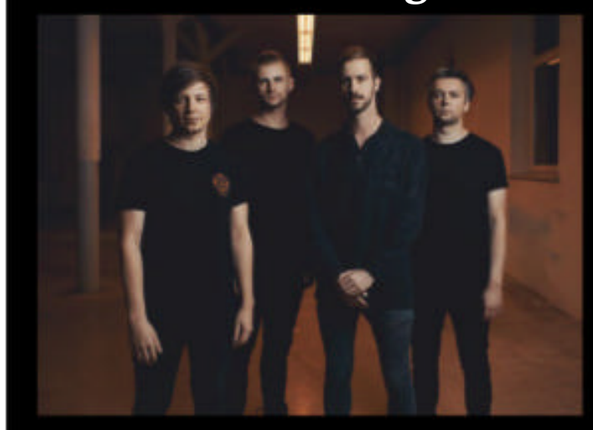
Adorned with surreal cover imagery from noted artist Jason Barnett, *Upheaval* showcases the ingenuity that's typified this band's work to date. This is technical death metal alright, but smarter and sharper than the average.

"We don't really want to run with the crowd," says Chris. "If you can stand out, whether it's with the music or the imagery, it's all for the good. We just want the art to speak for itself."

***UPHEAVAL* IS OUT NOW VIA PROSTHETIC**

IN THE KNOW

What your favourite bands are listening to



ANNISOKAY

"WE WORKED WITH Annisokay recently on the single *Shed My Skin*, but I don't just name them because we worked with them. We think their music is really exciting to listen to and really cool. Amazing vocals… it's melodic, it's heavy, it's everything we love, so check it out!"

SHARON DEN ADEL
WITHIN TEMPTATION

PRESS

KILLSTAR TAKEOVER

HOARD ALMIGHTY

Hoard Almighty and Killstar have formed the ultimate Samhain and All Hallow's Eve union to bring you the spookiest charms to raise the autumn spirits

GOTHY PLUSH TOY

£24.99

CREATED BY THE internationally renowned masterminds at Killstar, this befanged and pentagram-hoofed beast is an emissary from the ever-expanding Kreeptures family of soft yet thoroughly nefarious toys that inhabit the borderlands between nightmares and really comfortable, snuggly slumber. As with its fellow Kreeptures, Gothy is a highly collectible monster and limited to 3,000 manifestations equally inspired by the darker side of life and its various adjacent realms, where hauntings, horror movies, demons, hellcats and misfits run free. Seated at a massive 30cm of huggable soft plush fur, and with claws and a striped jumper Freddy Krueger would have good reason to kill for, Gothy is nonetheless suitable for ages six to six feet under. Embrace the dark side!

tinyurl.com/gothy-plush

KRUEGER KNIT SWEATER

£39.99

Say what you will about his methods, but razor-fingered child-murderer Freddy Krueger sure did have a natty sense of style. Tip your fedora to his classic sweater with this handsome slice o' knitwear.

tinyurl.com/krueger-knit

TOMB TRAVEL SUITCASE

£114.99

Actual death on the road, this. Just the right amount of grizzle to secure some extra legroom on a flight, nifty enough to stow away as carry-on luggage. A perfect suitcase for the jet-setting goth.

tinyurl.com/tomb-case

MAGICIAN TAPESTRY

£19.99

Take "This is where the magic happens" quite literally with this metre-and-a-half, soft-touch fabric tapestry. Hail Satan and stick it on your wall to finally cover up those old Keanu Reeves posters. You're 37 years old.

tinyurl.com/magic-tapestry

BAD BONES BELT

£24.99

Studs'n'skulls are two of the most heavy metal things ever – there's no denying it. As such, it makes perfect sense to hitch up thy kecks with this brutal, beautiful, brainpan-adorned belt.

tinyurl.com/bones-belt

TECHNOMET HOODIE

£49.99

Everyone's favourite occult pin-up gets a digital upgrade with this bold'n'bright hoodie. If you like the idea of dear ol' Baphomet gone part-Disney, part-manga and part glowstick-chewing raver then this one's for you!

tinyurl.com/technomet

HELL-O-WEEN MUG

£12.99

If you're looking for a spooky cup from which to sup, then look no further than this ceramic Jack-o'-lantern – perfect for a pitch-black cup of joe, but even better for a delicious, spiced pumpkin latte.

tinyurl.com/helloween-mug

SUPER CHARGED CARGO PANTS

£49.99

Cargo pants are the Swiss army knife of trousers, when you think about it: such possibilities! These are no different, with zips up the wazoo (well, not actually up the wazoo) and some cool rock club-appropriate detailing.

tinyurl.com/cargo-charged

OVERLOAD II VEST

£229.99

This vest looks like it was made exclusively for Rob Halford to model on his porch. It's handcrafted from A-grade synthetic leather, lined with satin and adorned with hundreds of spikes. Proper metal maniac stuff.

tinyurl.com/overload-vest

HOWL PET HOODIE

£12.99

Keep dear little Zoltan toasty with this gothed-out dog hoodie. As a bonus, it'll ensure all eyes are on your smartly dressed pup rather than you slipping its wet poo into a small plastic bag.

tinyurl.com/howl-hood

DRACO COWL HOODIE

£44.99

Sick of people demanding you name three songs every time you don a band hoodie? Suit up in this oversized, soft cotton jersey number to say: my favourite bands are so underground, they don't even do merch.

tinyurl.com/draco-cowl

HOCUS POCUS PILLOWCASES

£19.99

Spooky bedding for any respectable coffin, these pillowcases look as soft as Robert Smith's face. But for the love of Davey Havok, keep them the right way round. Pocus Hocus, the sure sign of an insane mind.

tinyurl.com/hocus-pillow

HACKER BOOTS

£89.99

Vegan leather. Pentagram details. Textured accents with enough definition to kick their way into the new *Matrix* movie. These boots are made for walking, wickedness and whatever people do in Cyberdog after hours.

tinyurl.com/hacker-boots

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BULLET FOR MY VALENTINE

NOTHING CAN BULLET FOR

STOP MY VALENTINE

They've survived trolls, trends and even dodgy album experiments. But thanks to the self-belief of Matt Tuck, in 2021 Bullet are more fired-up than ever

WORDS: DAVE EVERLEY • PICTURES: JAKE OWENS

On Saturday, June 5, 2004, Bullet For My Valentine played Download for the first time. It was lunchtime, and the young Welsh band were fourth from the bottom of the bill on the Barfly Stage, sandwiched between cult alt-rockers Yourcodenameis:milo and long-forgotten East London pop-punks The Holiday Plan.

Few people there knew who they were – Bullet's self-titled debut EP was still five months away from being released. But that didn't matter. After six years of trying and failing to catch a break, they were finally on their way.

"The night before, we played the Camden Barfly with 36 Crazyfists," says singer and guitarist Matt Tuck now. "We packed up the van, drove to Download, got there at four or five in the morning, no sleep, excited, then got up and played at one o'clock in the afternoon."

Bullet had been putting in the hard yards since they'd formed in Bridgend as Jeff Killed John in 1998. They'd played every tiny club, beer-sodden back room and leaky shithole going, but this was something else. "We hadn't been on a stage that big before," says Matt. "The experience of it was challenging and demanding, but it felt like such a big moment."

It was, but it wouldn't be the last. Bullet were back at Download the next year and the year after that, jumping up a stage each time. Over the next decade and a half they became Download's unofficial house band, making eight more appearances. They were main support on the big stage more than once, and even closed the second stage in 2010. But the holy grail – an actual, bona fide Main Stage headlining spot – eluded them.

That finally changed last June. Download Pilot was the first major British music festival to take place since the pandemic hit, and Bullet topped the bill on the third and final night. It was a reduced-capacity gig, and a mainly British line-up, but that didn't matter. "We were aware of the situation, aware of what it meant for live music and aware of what it meant to us," says Matt.

He was excited and nervous beforehand, "which I hadn't felt for a long time," he says. "It was very familiar and unfamiliar at the same time, like the past 18 months hadn't happened. Very weird."

But things really hit home towards the end of their electrifying set. "It had gone so well, everyone's vibing and having a good show," he says. "That's when the emotion kicked in. It was a joyous moment, for the crowd and for us."

Matt Tuck has had a good pandemic, if anything defined by widespread tragedy, untold misery and spiralling anxiety can be called 'good'.

The unexpected pause allowed him to do the kind of regular-person things successful working musicians don't normally get to do: cooking, cleaning, spending more time than usual with his family. He helped home-school his son and did Joe Wicks' online workouts. He was running 10K a day until he got a stress fracture in his shin, which put him out of action for 10 weeks. "I didn't get too caught up in it emotionally or get stressed out about it," he says of the Covid situation. "That's all you can do."

"WE'RE LIVING THROUGH A REALLY MAD TIME"
MATT TUCK

He also managed to make the best Bullet For My Valentine record of the last decade in the shape of their self-titled seventh album. A 10-track, 45-minute assault of ferocity and intent, it dispenses with the stylistic wriggles that defined the last three albums and goes straight for the throat. The party line is that this is the sound of Bullet For My Valentine V2.0, though it doesn't sound radically different to Bullet For My Valentine V1.0 – just meaner, leaner and in no mood to mess around.

"It's not that different really. It's still myself leading the charge and writing stuff. It's just that transitional period is over," he says, referring to the line-up changes that saw bassist Jamie Mathias and drummer Jason Bowld brought in to replace original members Jay James and 'Moose' Thomas between *Venom* and *Gravity* (a reluctance to talk about the latter pair today suggests there's still tension between the various camps).

It's lunchtime and we're sitting in a cosy pub in the backstreets of the well-heeled part of West London where Matt lives. He looks healthy, even a little tanned, like a man who has enjoyed a surprise holiday. But he's a cautious interviewee – not unfriendly, but not given to big, dramatic statements or revealing too much of himself. At one point he says, "Do we have to talk about money?" in response to a question about how much his first, presumably measly royalty cheque was for.

He's understandably more enthusiastic on the subject of his band's new album. For Bullet, he says, the pandemic was more of a help than a hindrance. They had always planned to take 2020 off, but suddenly all deadlines went out of the window. "It took the pressure off," he says. "It meant we could focus on really working on these songs, getting them right."

One of the album's standout tracks is *Bastards*, a song that's as anthemically blunt as its title. *'Lies, denial, corruption, criminals,'* Matt roars, seemingly channelling the ire of a nation at the venality and incompetence of the ruling elite over the past 18 months. It's about Boris Johnson and his cronies, right?

"It was kind of wrapped up in that moment," he says cautiously. "I tried not to make it a political song, because that's not what the band are about. But we're living through a really mad time now, so I tried to capture that without being too political about it."

Where *Gravity* was an auto-biographical album, written as he was going through the process of divorcing his wife (they've since reconciled), this time around the likes of *Parasite* (*'I hate you / I hope you choke'*) and *Rainbow Veins* (*'Diving head first into a black hole / Becoming unstable mentally'*) come with a degree of distance.

"It's hard with lyrics; you try to draw as much realism and emotion, because then it feels like it matters more," he says. "I don't shy away from autobiography, but I've said everything I need to say over the seven albums."

June 2006. Bullet are dropping off their bags in their dressing room ahead of their first show opening for Metallica on the latter's Escape From The Studio tour when the door opens. In the doorway is a figure they all know well, even though none of them have met him previously.

"Hi, I'm Lars," says the figure.

"Yeah, we *know*," chorus a gob-smacked Bullet For My Valentine. "Come in."

Lars Ulrich steps inside and does what he does best, which is charm the pants off the people he meets. He tells Bullet how much he likes the version of *Welcome Home (Sanitarium)* they'd recorded for a recent *Master Of Puppets* covers album and generally makes

Matt Tuck: Metallica fanboy

the younger band feel welcome. Later, Matt bumps into James Hetfield and asks him for a picture.

"Was I cool and composed? Not at all," says the Bullet singer with a laugh, and for a moment there's a flash of Matt Tuck: Teenage Heavy Metal Geek. "They were these untouchable, mythical creatures, and suddenly they are here in front of us, flesh and bone."

Metallica are the reason Matt is here today. Seeing *Enter Sandman* on TV at the age of 14 inspired him to pick up the guitar and teach himself to play it. That was it: no doubts, no lessons, just plunge straight in and do it. "As soon as you get the basics, off you go," he says, like it's the easiest thing in the world.

Which of course, it isn't. It takes focus and determination to pick up an instrument and learn it, even at 14 (*especially* at 14). "It's just dedication," he says now, shrugging. "If you want to take something seriously, there's not really any other option than to do it the best you can."

He was a county-level rugby player and a national-level basketball player in his teens, before his passion for music sidelined his other interests. "I never strove to be the best at anything, I just strove to be the best I could be at what I was doing, whether it was music or sports," he says.

That drive is what saved his band from the fate of tens of thousands of long-forgotten groups who came before and have come since. For the first four or five years of their existence as Jeff Killed John, no one was interested.

"It was very hard and demoralising – you dedicate yourself to something, sacrifice a lot of yourself, don't make any money, and you're not getting anywhere," he says. "There were moments when I thought about throwing in the towel and putting my energies elsewhere. Like, 'Damn, this isn't going the way we thought.'"

How close did he come to quitting? "Pretty close. I didn't have a Plan B. I had a job in a record shop, but I wasn't earning enough to be self-sufficient. I could have stayed in retail or worked in the factories. But then there was no other option. I was so passionate and motivated about music."

It was, he says, the sheer will to succeed that kept him going. "That and having a belief that if we were given that opportunity we'd be alright. But it was hard work."

One of the many unanticipated side effects of the pandemic was the way it forced musicians to find necessary hustles in order to keep the wolf from the door and

Bullet For My Valentine V2.0

"METALLICA WERE THESE MYTHICAL CREATURES"

MATT TUCK

generally make sure people didn't forget they existed. This involved people putting themselves out there in any way they could, whether it was Matt Heafy owning Twitch or every single bassist from a C-list metal band appearing on some lockdown cover or other.

Matt Tuck was noticeable by his absence during that whole period. This was mainly down to having an album to record, but also because putting himself out there isn't a very Matt Tuck thing to do. You won't find him pushing his brand on TikTok or Twitch. Or onstage for that matter.

"I'm not the most verbal frontman," he says. "I find it a little bit awkward trying to come up with stuff in between songs. I don't really like to talk and have banter. I find it… not difficult, but I just don't see that there's any point in it."

This reserve doesn't come from a lack of confidence. In fact it's the opposite – if there's one thing Matt Tuck isn't short of, it's confidence. It was unshakeable self-belief that got him through the tough times early in Bullet's career, after all. "I've always believed in myself," he says. "Like with sport at school – I just wanted to be the best I can."

There have been times when that self-belief has been tested, most notably around the time of 2013's ill-starred *Temper Temper*. While that album is nowhere near the stinker its reputation suggests (though Matt admits it "wasn't aggressive enough"), the mauling it received must have given even his bulletproof confidence a battering?

"No," he says firmly. "Because you do stuff in the moment, and that's what we were doing in that moment. At the time we wanted to get radio play, and that was what was needed. It wasn't the most well-received record – I'm well aware of that. It's never nice when you put your heart and soul into something and it's not well-received. But you learn to deal with it."

Ten days later, Bullet joined James Hetfield and co onstage at a big outdoor gig in Estonia for their cover of *So What?*. By that point any awe at being in the presence of their heroes had dissipated. As Matt stepped out in front of several thousand drunken Estonians with the world's biggest metal band, one thing went through his mind. "Just take it in," he says with a smile. "Enjoy it."

From the outside, it seems like there's been a lot to enjoy about being a member of Bullet For My Valentine.

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There have been countless bucket-list moments that would have blown away the teenage Matt Tuck – as well as Metallica, they've opened for Iron Maiden and a pre-reunion Guns N' Roses ("I didn't get to meet Axl Rose," says Matt, sadly).

It's unlikely he would have got to parachute out of a helicopter 200 miles north of the Arctic Circle while playing his guitar, as Matt did in 2016 for a Jägermeister stunt. "It was great until the wires crossed in the air," he says now. "You shit your pants and think, 'This is it.'"

Also in realm of the unlikely was an unexpected namecheck from *Suicide Squad* star Margot Robbie, who revealed she had been a teenage BFMV fan. "That was pretty wild," says Matt. "But then she was a normal kid growing up in Australia who loved metal."

But there have been tough times too. More than once this was down to

"I THOUGHT ABOUT THROWING IN THE TOWEL"

MATT TUCK

Matt pushing himself as hard as he could. In 2005, during sessions for their debut album *The Poison*, he screamed so hard he began having palpitations. "I freaked out. So I popped to the hospital," he says (it was a panic attack).

More serious were the vocal problems he had a couple of years later. The toll of touring, travelling and never having been taught how to sing properly blew out his tonsils. "I'd be ill for five days, OK for two or three, then dying for a week," he says. "It was shit."

He eventually had his tonsils removed, though not before low-level discussions about him taking a step back as singer and focusing on writing the songs and playing guitar. "It was just drama and fear going on, I don't think there was ever a serious question of that happening: like, 'What if he doesn't come back?'" Could he imagine not being the singer in Bullet for My Valentine? "I can definitely imagine it," he says. "I just don't think it's the identity of the band."

He doesn't push himself quite as hard now. This is partly due to fatherhood. "It's definitely made me ▶

Padge: in it for the long haul

"MATT'S A MONSTER FRONTMAN"

Guitarist Michael 'Padge' Paget on being besties with Matt, headlining Download Pilot and meeting Axl Rose

FIVE MINUTES BEFORE YOU WALKED ONSTAGE AT DOWNLOAD PILOT, WHAT WAS GOING THROUGH YOUR MIND?
"It was absolutely terrifying. I was anxious, nervous, scared in case anything went wrong. We hadn't done it for so long. I was just so worried in case my head got to me and it stopped my fingers working. But everything was perfect in the end."

WAS IT EMOTIONAL?
"It was. Especially two or three songs from the end, because I knew we had to stop again after this, and we didn't know for how long it'd be. But, you know, we finally headlined Download!"

YOU'VE KNOWN MATT SINCE YOU WERE KIDS AT SCHOOL. WHAT WAS HE LIKE THEN?
"He hasn't changed. He's always been very determined. He's quiet – he doesn't like attracting attention. I think he's shy, but then he turns around onstage and he's a monster frontman. Me and Matt have been through many ups and downs, some really hard times, but we've stuck together and we've got through it. We both realise how important it is to us, this band. Nothing must get in the way."

WHAT'S YOUR FAVOURITE MEMORY OF BEING IN BULLET FOR MY VALENTINE?
"Getting onstage with Metallica in Estonia and just seeing this sea of blond hair singing along with us. Then when we did our own show in London, we had an aftershow, and Metallica turned up with Machine Head. It's like, 'How the fuck did that happen?'"

YOU TOURED WITH GUNS N' ROSES EARLY IN YOUR CAREER. DID YOU GET TO MEET AXL?
"I did, and it was weird. I went to this party in this bar in New York. Axl Rose was there, Fred Durst, Mickey Rourke, Lenny Kravitz. Mental. At some point, our manager pulled Axl over and goes, 'This is the opening band.' He was really quiet, but I'm like, 'Axl Rose, fucking hell, happy days, man.'"

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less full-on in terms of focus," he says. "It made me more loving."

What comes first these days: band or family?

"Family, definitely," he says instantly. "That wasn't the case before. It wasn't even the case when this baby was a toddler. I was still riding the wave. And it's difficult to slow down. But you have to learn to take your foot off the pedal. But as soon as we have with the last couple of albums, it's like, 'Oh, nothing happened, nothing went wrong, it's OK.'"

For all that, he's still unequivocally at the centre of Bullet For My Valentine. Matt doesn't just write the songs and sing the songs, he plays a lot of the guitar and all the bass on them too. Isn't that weird?

"No, it's something we've always done," he says. "A lot of bands do it. Jamie was given the option: 'It's your gig if you want to do it.' And he was, like, 'No, man, you'll be locked in with the songs, it's quicker if you do it.' He'd have to learn 16 songs. That takes weeks, potentially. I could do it in a day."

Does Matt expect the rest of the band to march to his beat?

"Not march to the beat," he says. "It's always a democracy – I like to have the band involved as much as possible in everything, but when a decision has to be made, all eyes come to me anyway. I've always been the main songwriter, and when it comes down to it, the guys just have to come along for the ride when it comes to the music most of the time. But thankfully they're into it."

This has caused issues in the past, not least with Padge. The guitarist was excluded from the recording process for *Temper Temper*, and both he and Matt have admitted there was friction last time around *Gravity* too. "He wasn't really behind where we were going with it," says the singer. "That was our stickiest patch. But we've known each other for a long time. You deal with it. Yes, there's times when we bicker, but it's a brotherly thing."

Matt and Padge are the only two remaining members from the line-up that recorded *The Poison*. If the guitarist left, would Bullet carry on without him? Matt shakes his head. "I don't think so, no."

The late lunchtime rush is over, and the pub has quietened down. Matt has to head off soon to do the school run. He's enjoyed this current normality, but then there's another kind of normality waiting to reassert itself: the new album arrives in

Jamie Mathias: stand aside, Laurence Llewelyn-Bowen!

"I RIPPED THINGS APART"

Bassist Jamie Mathias on home-schooling, side-project Shadow Addict and, er, the return of *Changing Rooms*

WHAT WAS IT LIKE MAKING AN ALBUM DURING THE PANDEMIC?
"It was weird, but you just get on with it. Everyone was doing it, it wasn't just us. But it meant we had more time to work on music. When we could get together, we were down Padge's. It turned out brilliantly."

HOW HAVE THE LAST 18 MONTHS BEEN FOR YOU PERSONALLY?
"It's been hard, like for everybody, but you take the positives, like spending time with the family. I've got a boy of six, so I was at home with him, trying to home-school him. He was teaching me more than I was teaching him!"

WHERE DID YOU FIRST MEET THE BULLET GUYS?
"Well, I was a massive fan, and I got to know Padge through my old band, Revoker. We started doing a bit of writing together, then one day I got a text off him saying, 'We're looking for a new member, do you fancy auditioning?' Things with the old band were slowing down, so I thought, 'Why not?'"

ASIDE FROM WORKING ON THE NEW ALBUM, HOW DID YOU SPEND THE LAST 18 MONTHS?
"I kept myself busy. I always write music in my own time. Me and Jase [Bowld] did a side thing, Shadow Addict – a classic lockdown project. We ended up writing some stuff for Sky TV, but I've no idea where it will end up. And I was renovating houses as well."

RENOVATING HOUSES? YOU MUST BE EXCITED BY THE RETURN OF *CHANGING ROOMS*...
"Ha ha! Yes. I wasn't renovating them myself. I'd rip things apart, then my mates would come in and do all the work!"

WHAT'S BEEN THE BEST THING ABOUT BEING IN BULLET?
"It's gotta be Download. It was one of the first festivals I went to, so to headline that and have our friends and family there made it even more special. When you're a kid in your room, that's what you dream of."

"YOU SHIT YOUR PANTS AND THINK, 'THIS IS IT'"

MATT TUCK

November, and there's a UK tour kicking off a few weeks before its release, Covid permitting.

"I get the feeling people want to get out there and embrace live music, being in a room with 500, 1,000 other people who feel the same," he says. "They want to feel life again."

Download was a huge step in that direction – not just for the crowd, but for Bullet too. "I didn't miss playing in front of an audience until that point," he says. "We've been doing this for so long that you forget how cool it is. Then we got out there and it was, like, 'This is *fucking* good.'"

When does he think they'll be asked back to headline the fully fledged festival? "If the day comes where we get asked back to headline, that'll be great," he says, the model of circumspection. "Just being asked to do that one was an amazing experience."

We talk for a while longer. He mentions the band carried on writing even after they finished the new album. They're stockpiling songs, potentially for release as one-off singles drops and standalone tracks after *Bullet For My Valentine* comes out. "We seem to be on a creative roll right now," he says. "Every time we go in the studio something cool happens."

He talks about a guest appearance he's made on an upcoming album by Norwegian singer – and *Vikings* actor – Per Fredrik Åsly, aka PelleK ("That guy's voice is amazing."). And he mentions he'd like to get out of the same old touring circuit they've played for the last 15 years. "You end up going to the same places," he says. "It's actually boring." He wants to play places Bullet have never been: India and China. "That might be a while though," he says wryly.

And then our time is up. There's a young child to pick up from school. Matt checks his phone, offers a handshake and then he's off, striding out the door and down the street, into a future even he can't control.

***BULLET FOR MY VALENTINE* IS OUT ON NOVEMBER 5 VIA SPINEFARM. THE BAND TOUR THE UK IN OCTOBER AND NOVEMBER**

Jason Bowld: check your egos at the door, people

"IT WAS APOCALYPTIC"

Drummer Jason Bowld on an riotous Knotfest Mexico, joining Bullet and why drummers are like goalkeepers

WHAT CAN YOU REMEMBER ABOUT THE LAST BULLET GIG BEFORE THE WORLD SHUT DOWN?
"It was November 2019 at Knotfest Mexico. The fans went crazy. They'd been dismantling the barrier waiting for Slipknot, then they set fire to Evanescence's drum kit, so it ended up being cancelled before they could play. It was quite apocalyptic. A portent of what was to come."

HOW WAS DOWNLOAD FOR YOU? NERVOUS?
"No. I was so focused on playing. Being a drummer is like being a goalkeeper – no one ever praises you if you don't let any goals in, but if you suck you're to blame for everything. That's all that was on my mind: don't suck. I think the crews were getting more emotional than the bands, understandably."

YOU JOINED THE BAND FULL TIME AFTER THEIR SECOND LINE-UP CHANGE IN TWO YEARS. WHAT WAS THE MOOD IN THE BAND LIKE?
"Everyone was knackered, 'cos I joined in the middle of a tour. I turned up going, '[Energetic voice] Hey everybody, I'm really excited to play!' Hopefully that gave them a bit of an energy injection. Then when we were working on this album, it was, like, 'Wow, this is the best album Bullet have done!'"

WHY?
"*Gravity* was difficult, plus it was mine and Jamie's first time in the band. We didn't know how it would be received – even though the reception ended up being great. But this time we've created something that sounds organic and natural. It could spawn another three or four albums in this direction."

WHAT'S THE BEST THING ABOUT BEING IN BULLET FOR MY VALENTINE?
"They're my kind of people. There's no pretension, no egos – drummers don't have the time to deal with egos anyway. And it's the most professional band I've played in, for sure."

WHO'S THE LEAST PROFESSIONAL?
"Ha ha! I can't tell you that!"

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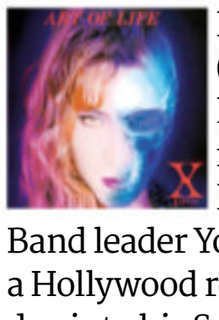
THE 25 GREATEST SYMPHONIC METAL ALBUMS

It's become one of metal's most enduring subgenres – and it's even spawned some of our biggest bands. Grab your keyboard and come dig inside some classics

WORDS: HYWEL DAVIES, MALCOLM DOME, ELEANOR GOODMAN, CHRIS CHANTLER, CONNIE GORDON, SPENCER GRADY, ADAM REES, JONATHAN SELZER

The symphonic urge has existed in heavy music since its earliest rumblings. Deep Purple unveiled their extraordinary *Concerto For Group And Orchestra* in 1969, a gleefully pretentious benchmark for future symphonically inclined headbangers, while the classical flourishes on Black Sabbath's *Spiral Architect* and choral arrangements on *Supertzar* blew mid-70s minds. Guitarist Ritchie Blackmore engaged the Munich Philharmonic Orchestra for Rainbow's majestic 1976 epic *Stargazer*, planting seeds that started blossoming in the 80s with neoclassical guitar heroes Yngwie Malmsteen, Randy Rhoads and Marty Friedman. Each metallic subgenre has since developed its own symphonic strain, reaching new heights of drama, emotion and virtuosity. Here are the greatest.

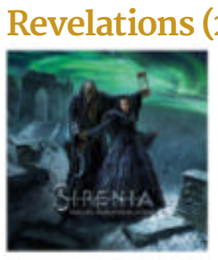
25 X JAPAN
Art Of Life (1993)



In the early 90s, X Japan (née X) were at their height of popularity. With fame and fawning came limitless self-indulgence. Band leader Yoshiki purchased a Hollywood recording complex and dug into his Scrooge McDuck-ian vault to hire London's Royal Philharmonic Orchestra to join him on *Art Of Life*'s two-year-long recording journey. Rife with everything from an eight-minute piano solo, melodic thrash and enough synths to entomb Vangelis in spandex, it was 29 minutes of gloriously off-kilter, high-forehead glitz and classical-inspired speed metal precision.

LISTEN TO: *Art Of Life*

24 SIRENIA
Riddles, Ruins & Revelations (2021)



Pushing the boundaries of what it means to be a symphonic metal band, Sirenia's 10th studio album embraced the darker side of the human psyche, as themes of addiction and declining mental health took centre stage in this sprawling epic. The Norwegians welcomed huge, melodic death metal elements to an already bustling pallet of gothic synths, infectious grooves and seductive melodies, Sirenia's duality of melding beautiful music to harrowing subject matter making for a sympho-industrial masterpiece.

LISTEN TO: *Towards An Early Grave*

23 HAGGARD
Eppur Si Muove (2004)

Asis Nasseri has overseen Haggard's development from early 90s prog-death hopefuls to extra-ordinary chamber orchestral metal collective, employing oboe, clarinet, flute, kettledrum and crumhorn. With an impressive 28 credited musicians, this third album – based around the life of Italian astronomer Galileo – was an undertaking as ambitious as it was eccentric, but the balance was perfected. Refined melodies that could have accompanied an 18th-century country house tea party were regularly brutalised by Asis Nasseri's fierce, crunching guitar, cosmic doom-death riffs and guttural ejaculations.

LISTEN TO: *The Observer*

22 THE YOUNG GODS
L'eau Rouge (1989)

No one has ever made symphonic metal quite like Geneva's The Young Gods. If their self-titled debut album's looped samples of classical music and barbed riffs instigated a cataclysmic new dawn for heavy music, the follow-up was stealthier yet no less devastating. From *La Fille De La Mort*'s invoking of molten new landscapes from the most pastoral of starts, through *Charlotte*'s subterranean barrel-organ whirl, to the string-stirred threnodies of *Les Enfants* sounding like a prelude to The Four Horsemen, *L'Eau Rouge* was terrifying and exhilarating in equal measure.

LISTEN TO: *La Fille De La Mort*

21 AESMA DAEVA
The Eros Of Frigid Beauty (2002)

A collective masterminded by obsessive leader/boundary-pusher John Prassas, this Minnesota-based ensemble were unique for a number of reasons, their combination of avant-garde metal with gilded chamber music and modern classical being one of them. Aesma Daeva pushed additional buttons with *The Eros Of Frigid Beauty*'s use of drum programming, and flirted with what we now recognise as synth and darkwave. That this trailblazing mix emerged 20 years ago during the rise of metalcore meant they were virtually ignored and unfortunately never got due respect.

LISTEN TO: *Lysander*

Delain: couldn't be contained in a studio

20 DELAIN
Lucidity (2006)

Former Within Temptation keyboardist Martijn Westerholt intended Delain to be a studio project, but his ambitious vision melded cinematic orchestration and bombastic metal into an extravagant gothic symphony too good to be kept locked away. Appearances from previous bandmate Sharon den Adel and then-Nightwish bassist Marko Hietala helped Delain's credibility, however it was the angelic vocals of (now former) frontwoman Charlotte Wessels that brought the band's debut album to life. Majestic and heart-sweepingly melodramatic, *Lucidity* is an essential chef's kiss of a record. Mwah!

LISTEN TO: *A Day For Ghosts*

19 THE DEVIN TOWNSEND PROJECT
Deconstruction (2011)

Devin Townsend is no stranger to the kitchen sink approach. Such was the scope of the third album of his eclectic Devin Townsend Project venture, and the sheer volume of ideas crammed in, that the symphonic elements weren't actually the headline act. But even with the Canadian's eccentricity and humour doing their best to hog the limelight on *Deconstruction*, the opulence of the strings and choirs on *Juular*, *Stand* and the tumultuous title track were impossible to ignore.

LISTEN TO: *Deconstruction*

18 AVANTASIA
The Metal Opera (2001)

The brainchild of Tobias Sammet, this debut album from Avantasia featured a raft of top vocalists, including Michael Kiske of Helloween and Sharon den Adel from Within Temptation, on a concept album based around the witch trials in Germany in the 16th and 17th centuries. The album lived up to the title, having a massive, almost Wagnerian approach that was expansive yet also offered subtle moments. There was genuine joy and cohesion in the way it was presented, and the quality was undeniable.

LISTEN TO: *Avantasia*

17 LABYRINTH
Return To Heaven Denied (1998)

This Tuscany sextet lean more towards power metal than full-on symphonic metal, but their strength lies in how huge they make the traditional guitar/bass/drums/keys line-up sound. The speed and fluidity of *Return To Heaven Denied* nudged ahead of early Dragonforce and Sonata Arctica on the

PRESS

timeline, but their incorporation of classical guitars, keyboard layers and Roberto 'Rob Tyrant' Tiranti's vocal skyscraping made this an underrated gem that reeked of flair, hoity-toity panache, studious prog nerd stuff and tons of great songs.
LISTEN TO: ***State Of Grace***

16 BAL-SAGOTH
Starfire Burning Upon The Ice-Veiled Throne Of Ultima Thule (1996)

The Yorkshire black metallers suffered from horrendous technical issues on this second album, but it forced them to be inventive, and the result is one of the finest symphonic black metal albums ever released. Not only was it inevitably brutal, they took inspiration from movie composers such as John Williams, turning towards the wildly imaginative and melodic.
LISTEN TO: ***And Lo, When the Imperium Marches Against Gul-Kothoth, Then Dark Sorceries Shall Enshroud The Citadel Of The Obsidian Crown***

15 SYMPHONY X
The Divine Wings Of Tragedy (1996)

Pinging off references to Bach, Mozart, Holst, Milton and Dante, Symphony X were never exactly your average gang of New Jersey metalheads. *The Divine Wings Of Tragedy* was their third album in three years, the young band reaching a precociously astonishing high watermark of neo-classical progressive power metal, with the virtuoso solos of founding guitarist Michael Romeo, the high-class, Dio-esque attack of singer Russell Allen and the sophisticated symphonic urges of keyboardist Michael Pinnella each adding incalculably to the record's sense of dizzying momentum.
LISTEN TO: ***Out Of The Ashes***

14 THEATRE OF TRAGEDY
Velvet Darkness They Fear (1996)

Arguably the most important of the European bands springing up in reaction to the romantic gothic doom innovations of My Dying Bride, this Norwegian septet's seductive second album was steeped in the spirit of grandiloquent overdrive. Not only one of the first doom bands to employ full-time keyboards, Theatre Of Tragedy pioneered metal's 'beauty and the beast' aesthetic, with duetting angelic/demonic vocals giving fulsome voice to a mournful soundtrack enhanced by the strings of the Streicherensemble Nedeltcho Boiadjiev, under German pianist Klaus Wagenleiter.
LISTEN TO: ***And When He Falleth***

Fleshgod Apocalypse: caustically heavy and super-speedy

PRESS

13 RHAPSODY OF FIRE
The Frozen Tears Of Angels (2010)

Originally called Rhapsody, before being forced to change their name in 2006, the Italians reached their apogee of mixing power metal and orchestration with the third chapter of their *Dark Secret Saga*. Gloriously overblown and with a distinct cinematic hue, it also featured movie icon Sir Christopher Lee as one of several narrators. Nothing about this album was formulaic, and its intertwining of delicacy and thunder is among the most compelling in symphonic metal.
LISTEN TO: ***Lost In Cold Dreams***

12 ARCTURUS
La Masquerade Infernale (1997)

Of all the genre-mutilating variations birthed by black metal's second wave during the late 90s, Arcturus's second album, *La Masquerade Infernale*, was surely the most baffling. Like a vaudevillian orchestra of Mad Hatters performing at Edgar Allan Poe's 'Hop-Frog' pageant, the Norwegian ensemble's staggering idiomatic aerobics danced capriciously between blockbuster strings, drum'n'bass and en-sorcerising choirs of cyborg mages, while *The Chaos Path* found guest vocalist Simen Hestnæs (aka I.C.S. Vortex) hamming it up perfectly in the role of ringmaster to an absurdist Grand Guignol.
LISTEN TO: ***The Chaos Path***

11 FLESHGOD APOCALYPSE
Veleno (2019)

They may dress like decomposing 18th-century composers, but these Italians' definitive factor is their connection to light-speed tech-death. Unlike their atmospheric and mid-paced, classically inspired contemporaries and influences, Fleshgod Apocalypse manage the inclusion of hyperactive, baroque keyboards and operatic caterwauling into metal that nudges shoulders with Nile, Origin and Archspire at its heart. Their 2019 album *Veleno* was the culmination of a decade's worth of caustically heavy, super-speedy death metal reeking of Paganini's putrefaction colliding with improved songwriting smarts and cogent, yet no less challenging, arrangements.
LISTEN TO: ***Sugar***

Q&A SIMONE SIMONS

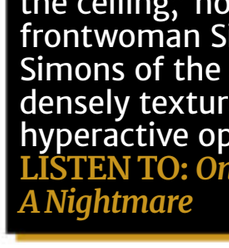
***The Holographic Principle* was your seventh studio album. Does it get harder to keep raising your game?**
"With each album, we challenge ourselves to become better musicians. Every album is a record in time of who we are at that moment, and *The Holographic Principle* was conceived during an extremely busy time in our career; in between touring we'd be in the studio, and on tour we'd be working on songs with our producer, Joost [van den Broek], who came with us so we could meet deadlines. So *The Holographic Principle* is a high-energy album – almost hyper-energetic! – but there are some awesome songs on it."

There was a five-year gap after *The Holographic Principle* – a lengthy hiatus for Epica. What triggered that?
"We felt a little burnt out. We learned from *The Holographic Principle* that it was impossible to keep that up. We were like a machine, pooping out albums every two years and touring the world simultaneously! Some of us have kids now, so we all decided we wanted a little break from touring and songwriting with a deadline. That was the biggest thing that we learned; we were going at such high speed, it was getting a bit much."

Which song are you most proud of, vocally?
"I really love the ballad *Once Upon A Nightmare*. When I wrote the lyrics, I had no clue what I was going to write about, and my husband said, 'Why not draw inspiration from The Elder King?' Which is basically a very dark fairy tale that describes this white creature taking away little children in the middle of the night. I became a mother after *The Quantum Enigma* [2014], and I thought, 'I like [this song]', but afterwards I was like, 'No, I don't like this! Now I've got to sing this song that's reminding me of this creepy thing!' But it's art. All our music and lyrics are personal to a certain extent, but I had to disconnect from that in order to be able to put the right emotion into that song, but not make it too personal."

What's your standout memory of making *The Holographic Principle*?
"The timing of it was bad for me because I had a cold, so I was struggling with sniffles, but my voice was still powerful. Sometimes you get lucky – you get sick but you can still perform, and sometimes you feel good but the voice is gone. My most vivid memory was on the tour, when I was almost set on fire. It was in Tilburg during our 1,000th show, so of course we added pyrotechnics and all that great stuff. At the ending of the album's title track there was a curtain of sparklers coming down, and I was standing right underneath it, singing away, thinking, 'Why is my scalp burning?' That was not so nice! But I enjoyed the whole cycle of the album; I could go crazy with outfits and make-up. Because 'holographic' is all the colours of the rainbow, I could go completely nuts!"

10 EPICA The Holographic Principle (2016)



By their seventh studio platter, this hardworking Dutch sextet were a well-oiled machine: muscular, confident and keen to ramp up just about every element of their multi-faceted signature sound. More heavenly choirs, more unorthodox ethnic instrumentation, more brutal metal riffs, more of everything – and everything better, from storming killer-robot headbanger *Universal Death Squad* to the sublime elegiac grace of *Once Upon A Nightmare*. "You can't ever reach the ceiling," notes frontwoman Simone Simons of the album's densely textured, hyperactive opulence.
LISTEN TO: *Once Upon A Nightmare*

Epica: with *The Holographic Principle*, it was a case of more, more, more!

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9 SEPTICFLESH
The Great Mass (2011)

While black metal and orchestras have long made perfect bedfellows, even the grandest of death metal is often too technical and impenetrable to follow suit. Enter Greek guitarist Christos Antoniou, who combines his two disciplines in Septicflesh's sumptuous mix of savagery and splendour. *The Great Mass* is his magnum opus, with the appearance of the Prague Philharmonic Orchestra bringing drama and magnitude to the gothic textures and rumbling percussion of *Pyramid God* and *The Vampire From Nazareth*.

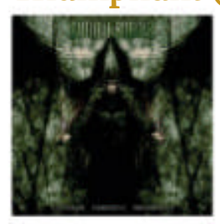
LISTEN TO: *Therianthropy*

8 THERION
Deggial (2000)

For these Swedish orchestral maestros – well, Christofer Johnsson and his hired guns – *Deggial* came during a career spell preceded by the insanely popular *Theli* and *Vovin* and followed by genre touchstones *Secrets Of The Runes*, *Lemuria and Sirius B*. Excellent company to be bookended by for sure, and *Deggial* was notable for being the first Therion album recorded with a full orchestra as opposed to a random group of handpicked musicians, and for never forgetting the role sinister darkness plays in metal, even metal this highbrow.

LISTEN TO: *The Invincible*

7 DIMMU BORGIR
Enthrone Darkness Triumphant (1997)



Smarting from the poor production on their second album, *Stormblåst*, Dimmu opted to sign with metal behemoth Nuclear Blast and record their next at Peter Tägtgren's The Abyss studio. The result was a huge evolutionary leap for the band and black metal as a whole. Redefining the genre's symphonic wing on their own terms, its sweeping majesty and vaulting ambition catapulted Dimmu from underground also-rans to the best-selling BM band of all time, while making The Abyss the go-to for corpsepainted hordes seeking to up their game.

LISTEN TO: *The Night Masquerade*

Q&A FLOOR JANSEN

After Forever. Don't hold your breath for a reunion, folks

6 AFTER FOREVER
Prison Of Desire (2000)

While many turn to *Decipher* as the jewel of these Dutch sensualists' discography, its predecessor, debut *Prison Of Desire*, not only shined a brighter light on the possibilities for growing orchestration and sumptuousness in metal, it introduced soprano Floor Jansen (current Nightwish vocalist) to the world. Coloured by the wildness of youth, main composer Mark Jansen's death metal past and the possibility their sound could have fallen flat with the denim'n'leather-clad hordes, *Prison Of Desire* teemed with rawness and no-holds-barred extravagance.

LISTEN TO: *Leaden Legacy*

You joined After Forever when you were only 16. Did you already know that this was what you wanted to do?
"No. Think of a bunch of teenagers that wanted to play music, and think before the internet. I liked metal. And I wanted to sing in a metal band. That was my ambition; I used to play guitar and write my own acoustic songs, then I played at parties of friends. And one day when I did that, somebody said, 'I know a bunch of guys that have a metal band, and they are looking for a female background singer', and that was After Forever. And so that's how I joined."

What were those early days like?
"We had this old-fashioned tape recorder in the middle of the room, so if we had an idea, we'd record it on that, and the rest we'd just remember. For the first I don't know how many years, the thing was; if I can remember my vocal lines, they're good. If I can't, they weren't worth it! That is how the songs came to be. We rehearsed twice a week – we were absolutely serious."

How did you feel, going into the studio to record your debut album, *Prison Of Desire*?
"I remember feeling aware that I didn't really know what I was doing, and at the same time, really sure of our band. I think we had teenage cockiness, which we needed. They had this *tiny* room, which was 10 square metres with bunk beds, where we all slept. And I still smoked. I smoked for a couple of years, heavy tobacco even. That really feels like another life!"

Your voice still sounds great!
"The smoking wouldn't have affected me so fast, but the lack of technique was something else. I had never had a vocal lesson in my life, not then, and not even when we started recording [2001's follow-up album] *Decipher*. So everything was done on a feeling of how you do it, and to try to imitate others and create my own sound. I have had flute lessons for many years, and I think that helped me get the breathing techniques. I'm naturally gifted with talent – I have my parents to thank for that, I suppose!"

What was it like recording the song *Beyond Me*, with Within Temptation's Sharon den Adel?
"Exciting. Because I really looked up to Within Temptation in those days. They were the big brother. They came directly after The Gathering, with [1997's] *Enter*, their first album. And I remember thinking that was *really* cool. She's a few years older than me, which nowadays doesn't really matter anymore. But when you're a young teenager, it does impress."

Is there any chance at all of After Forever reuniting?
"No, not as far as I'm concerned. I'm very content with where I am. It's good to leave things in the past. Many After Forever albums have been re-released, unfortunately without my consent. But now the latest [self-titled] album will be re-released next year and all members were involved, which is a huge difference. So that's something I can heart-warmingly recommend to fans or nostalgics. Something's coming."

PRESS

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Within Temptation: go epic, or go home

Q&A SHARON DEN ADEL

How did you find the process of working with an orchestra for the first time, especially working remotely with musicians in Russia?
"It was crazy! It was a very hard thing to do, especially at a distance; sometimes the communication with Russia was difficult. There were so many parts of the music that we had to control in the mixing, it was really stressful, but I think it worked very well. At the time it was an immense job to do, but looking back we did grow from that, as musicians and as a band. We were in the studio for two months at least – maybe longer? I think the whole summer. We were recording and writing at the same time a lot of the time. The orchestra came later, and we kept adjusting things."

It feels like this was your make-or-break album. Did you feel a lot of pressure to step it up?
"At the time I thought we didn't, but looking back, personally I did feel some pressure. Every time we brought out an album it was like, 'This is the best album ever!' – even with the first one, you know?! And *Mother Earth* went across the borders of the Netherlands, and we thought, 'OK, apparently this might even be something with a longer-term future, maybe we can be real musicians!' We all had day jobs still, so when it came to *The Silent Force*, we really wanted to make it really good and special. So for me, there was pressure. We had to take it seriously now!"

What were the biggest inspirations for the orchestral direction of this album?
"On *Mother Earth* we had some symphonic influence already, but it wasn't a real orchestra, and we wanted to have these sounds coming from a real orchestra, not a computer. So we wanted to develop it more, give it something extra, make it more epic. We were mostly inspired by film music, like the *Gladiator* soundtrack and *Braveheart*."

You headlined Bloodstock 2005 off the back of it. What do you remember about the day?
"It was in a two-storey building; I remember it was steaming hot inside, it felt like something was boiling. You could feel the audience and the band, there was some kind of magic in the air! We were surprised that so many people were very enthusiastic about the *Mother Earth* songs, because I think most people got to know us through *The Silent Force* in the UK, and then they discovered *Mother Earth* and that became more of a success after that, strangely."

How do you feel about the LP now?
"We still play a lot of the songs from that album because people still want to hear them, there are some gems on it – and I think it's also one of our darkest albums. Lyrically, the vibe was dark, which we liked, because we liked those epic movies, and they're never very happy! So I do like it, but I need to be in a certain kind of mood for it."

5 WITHIN TEMPTATION
The Silent Force (2004)

Although you're likely to be distracted by the captivating strength of Sharon den Adel's upfront vocal dynamism, Within Temptation's symphonic aspirations reached their most querulously romantic apex on this goosebump-inducing masterwork of the form. Although the guitars were louder and crunchier than on 2000's *Mother Earth*, and the open-hearted pop savvy was at full widescreen pelt, this 2004 follow-up confirmed the band's special affinity for wizardly orchestral bombast, here performed by the Ego Works Session Orchestra, under the noted Russian conductor Felix Korobov.

LISTEN TO: *Angels*

4 CRADLE OF FILTH
Dusk... And Her Embrace (1996)

One of Cradle Of Filth's crucial innovations was the refinement of black metal keyboards, escorting the instrument from its background role as wall of atmospheric noise to its own star in a lush erotic horror soundtrack. Suffolk's finest had engaged a philharmonic orchestra for their 2003 stab at major label stardom, *Damnation And A Day*, but Damien Gregori's humble organ was all they needed to nail the haunting bombast in 1996, his 'orchestral manoeuvres in the dark' providing classy respite from the surrounding cacophony.

LISTEN TO: *A Gothic Romance (Red Roses For The Devil's Whore)*

3 NIGHTWISH
Endless Forms Most Beautiful (2015)

While the Finnish band were already among the elite of symphonic metal, *Endless Forms Most Beautiful* really raised the bar for the genre. The concept was based around the evolutionary theories of Richard Dawkins – who even guests on the record – and Charles Darwin, and the scope and expanse of the music matched the ideological ambition. It all came together in a brilliantly realised, fully formed album, with new vocalist Floor Jansen proving a fine addition to the band. *Endless Forms Most Beautiful* was the sound of Nightwish coming of age.

LISTEN TO: *Élan*

2 CELTIC FROST
Into The Pandemonium (1987)

It's a real toss-up between 1985's *To Mega Therion* and *Into The Pandemonium* as to which Frostie full-length put more orchestration on display – and that's if either could even be considered full-on symphonic metal, given the left-field implementation of horns, woodwind and choral voices. But let's tip our hat to the album that starts with a Wall Of Voodoo cover (*Mexican Radio*) before broadly jumping into ornate goth, doom thrash and operatic arias. Whatever the case, it's arguable whether any of the albums on this list would even exist if it weren't for *Into The Pandemonium*'s bravery.

LISTEN TO: *Mexican Radio* (for the camp); *Inner Sanctum* (for the metal)

PRESS

1 EMPEROR
In The Nightside Eclipse (1994)

Founding duo Ihsahn and Samoth had tentatively tinkered with creepy background synth in demo band Thou Shalt Suffer in 1991, but with Emperor's much-delayed debut LP (recorded in summer '93, released in '94) these teenaged Norwegian wunderkinder were confidently blowing open new vistas of imperial grandiosity in black metal. Keyboards were sharply divisive in the early 90s metal scene; on Iron Maiden's 1985 video *Behind The Iron Curtain*, Bruce Dickinson declared to a fan, "You can't play heavy metal with synthesisers", and although Maiden started dabbling with synths just a year later, it's a flippant dictum to which metal purists held firm, many even remaining sniffy about Floridian death metallers Nocturnus for their novel use of a full-time keyboardist. With *In The Nightside Eclipse*, however, Emperor singlehandedly changed that perception. Suddenly all those dull childhood piano lessons paid off for a generation of metalheads now encouraged to bring their Casio home organ to rehearsal, on the basis that a bit of fake pipe organ and simulated string stabs guaranteed instant lavish atmospherics.

To be fair, these weren't the most sophisticated symphonics ever heard on a metal album. As the record's producer Eirik 'Pytten' Hundvin confirmed to us in 2019, primitive synth samples were laboriously patched into a 16-track recorder, linked via a timecode-reading device through the sound modules of an Atari computer. By the standards of Ihsahn's later performances for Emperor and his own solo work, the frontman's keyboard arrangements here might seem a restrained embellishment. But their impact on this material, on this recording, and on black metal as a whole, was colossal; the symphonic strain of *Nightside*'s tumultuous soundscape was its most powerfully haunting and hypnotic aspect, sweeping the listener into the night sky towards the moonlit realm of Necrolord's stunning cover art.

However primitively achieved, the placing of the symphonic elements within the album's soundscape was a painstaking process; Ihsahn told us in 2017 they remixed *The Majesty Of The Night Sky* 17 times. In addition, the hummable simplicity of the pseudo-orchestral and choral melodies were their resounding strength, helping symphonic BM classics such as *The Burning Shadows Of Silence*, *Beyond The Great Vast Forest*, *Inno A Satana* and *I Am The Black Wizards* take flight with an epic immensity that reshaped many priorities across the extreme metal scene, expanding the horizons of black metal to give this ugly, minimalistic cult sound a profound longevity and artistic flair.

"We wanted to create music that sounded fucking larger than life," Ihsahn said. "That's why we put all those keyboards in, all that reverb – we wanted it to sound like a soundtrack to the most epic, violent, dark movie! It was almost delusions of grandeur in an artistic sense. With our music we wanted to paint endless dark forests with a constant full moon, and to live that fantasy." Every time we enter *In The Nightside Eclipse*, that fantasy lives again.

LISTEN TO: ***Beyond The Great Vast Forest***

PRESS

OZZY OSBOURNE

THE SECOND COMING OF OZZY

Label fights, stinkbombs and Lemmy Kilmister: the making of *No More Tears* might have been chaotic, but it saved Ozzy Osbourne's career… and maybe even his life

WORDS: RICH HOBSON

PRESS/JEFF KATZ

OZZY OSBOURNE

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On September 3, 1989, Ozzy Osbourne awoke in a prison cell with an aching head and no memory of why he was there. While no stranger to waking up in strange places, the truth sickened him to his core: he was being charged with attempted murder, having tried to strangle his wife Sharon in a drink-and-drug-induced stupor. Though the couple reconciled, the writing was on the wall – the 80s were effectively dead and if Ozzy didn't sort his shit out, he would be too.

By the time he got out of rehab and started work on his next record, Ozzy was a new man, ready to banish the spectre of the ineffectual drunk clown that many had come to view him as. As he puts it to *Hammer* today, "*No More Tears* was a resurrection – I was fitter than I'd ever been and had something to prove."

Speaking to us 30 years on from the release of the album, it's hard to imagine Ozzy Osbourne – *the* Ozzy Osbourne, Prince Of Darkness and all – being on the back foot. Even with his recent Parkinson's diagnosis, he has continued work on his 13th solo record (he speaks to us today just before he's due in the studio), and is forging ahead with plans to complete his long-awaited 'No More Tours 2' run as soon as possible, pandemic be damned. "I can't fucking wait to come home," he says excitedly.

But back in 1990, doors were closing for the band before they'd even gone into the studio. A rough demo of *No More Tears* (sans the title track) was passed around prospective producers, but nobody in the industry was particularly enthused about the direction Ozzy was taking. Nobody that is, except for production duo John Purdell and Duane Baron. Unfortunately, that wasn't what the label wanted to hear.

"The record company called me at the studio to ask what my thoughts were on the demos," Duane remembers, his voice taking on a defiant edge. "Well, I liked them a lot and thought it was a good direction. They hung up so fast; they hated it and so we got fired!"

Though John and Duane would ultimately be brought back to produce the album, the label had other plans for the direction the new record should take to mark the new decade.

"Rick Rubin was looking to produce at one point," reveals long-time Ozzy guitarist Zakk Wylde. Speaking from his Los Angeles home, Zakk is nonchalant when asked about the strife leading up to the recording of *No More Tears*. "I don't worry about who's flying the plane – I just enjoy the ride," he laughs. "I was sent to Rick's house to get him on board and played him basically the whole demo. He says, 'Zakk, this is like a horrendous Mötley Crüe record.' He tells me, 'What we really need is some of that *Sabbath Bloody Sabbath* riff, we just need a whole record of *that*'. You know, I'm on board, the only problem is… you've gotta get the main guy on board; it's his band!"

Ozzy had no interest in peddling Sabbath knock-offs, however, and a last Hail Mary attempt to get him on board only strengthened his resolve. Pulled into a pre-production rehearsal, the plan had been for Zakk to play some Black Sabbath-style riffs to convince Ozzy to rewrite the record. Only, it didn't work out that way. "I'm just playing all these riffs, flying through all my Lord Iommi ideas and Ozzy just stands up and walks out," Zakk laughs. "I thought he was just taking a piss, but he'd gone home!"

"Eventually the label got the message and rehired myself and John to do it," Duane says sardonically. "But they also made it clear they were washing their hands of it."

"I'M PLAYING AND OZZY JUST STANDS UP AND WALKS OUT!"

ZAKK WYLDE

As it turns out, a lack of label interference might have been *exactly* what *No More Tears* needed. With Duane and John at the helm, the pair were free to cast off the shackles of Sabbath-worship and get to making a truly great Ozzy Osbourne record. "John Purdell and Duane Baron were *instrumental* when it came to arrangements," Ozzy says. "We knew we had to attack every song as if it was going to be played on the radio – we had to step up to the plate. I had a lot to prove!"

"Ozzy was coming off a bit of a lull – it really was the last chance saloon at that point," Duane admits. "But we loved what Ozzy had done solo as much as Sabbath, so it was like, 'Dammit, we're not gonna let this fuckin' fall.'"

Trading out the camp kitsch of Ozzy's earlier material, *No More Tears* was simultaneously written to be more anthemic while delving into darker and more serious lyrical territory than ever before. Songs covered topics ranging from serial killers (*No More Tears*) and paedophilia (*Mr. Tinkertrain*), to Ozzy's homesickness when out on tour (*Mama, I'm Coming Home*). A heartfelt ballad, the latter became an instant fan favourite and his only solo Top 40 hit on the Billboard Hot 100.

"*Mama, I'm Coming Home* was actually written on the piano," Zakk says. "One day I was out driving Ozzy when I had to go by the house, this rundown fuckin' place with grass five feet high, shutters hanging off, beat-down piece of shit. We pulled onto the driveway and Ozzy grabs me and says, 'Sharon's paying you, isn't she?!' I broke up laughing! Anyway, we went into the apartment and I'd got the piano there, so we ended up sat at it coming up with the riff for *Mama, I'm Coming Home*."

Even more impressive was the fact that as heartfelt as it was, the song's lyrics weren't written by Ozzy, but by fellow icon Lemmy Kilmister. "It was the most amazing thing," Ozzy remarks. "I couldn't have written it better myself, because it was just so perfectly *me*. He knew what I was trying to say perfectly. I could never be serious around him because we'd always have great fun. It was a true rock'n'roll lifestyle he lived, and I miss him terribly, you know."

While the lyrical content of *No More Tears* took a darker direction, Ozzy and the band weren't about to let his new-found sobriety get in the way of having fun. "Ozzy had these stink bombs he just kept letting off," Zakk says with glee. "You could use them to clear fuckin' *buildings*, not rooms. Ozzy would be there at the back, 'Sorry…' and we'd be gagging, 'Ozzy what the FUCK?!' They were worried he wouldn't be able to finish the record."

"Honestly, at first we thought he had a real problem," chuckles Duane. "He'd drop them everywhere – the studio, on flights, we even went to Las Vegas for a weekend and he dropped them in a casino! He would terrorise us with them."

Not about to let themselves be upstaged, Zakk and drummer Randy Castillo also found a *unique* way of getting back at Ozzy. "I knew we had to get him back… so I took a shit in a bag," Zakk hoots. "Every day, Oz had this couch that he would sit on to watch World War II videos or whatever, so I take my enormous shit and cut a tiny little hole, sliding it in until it's properly hidden up the back of the couch. Meanwhile, Randy goes and takes a shit in some

PRESS/JEFF KATZ

Clockwise from top:
Ozzy Osbourne, Mike Inez,
Randy Castillo, Zakk Wylde

That new *Red Dead Redemption* game looks decent

Tupperware, which he then stores in the fridge for later. Only Ozzy got us back for *that* too."

We daren't ask…

"One night, Randy's all fresh from the shower and as we're preparing to head out he just stops. Suddenly the lights go out and Randy flicks his lighter and he's like, 'Where the fuck is he?' because he can smell shit. He's looking all around and then realises, it's on the door handle! We look back towards Ozzy's room and we can just see him, curtains pulled back, staring down to see if we were gonna grab the door handle, that motherfucker!"

"I sat there smelling shit for hours before I realised," Ozzy cackles of the sofa joke. "When I went to the fridge for leftovers, I found *leftovers* alright! But we were *always* pulling shit on each other – we had a lot of fun."

Beyond the pranks, one of the band's jokes even resulted in an award-winning song: *I Don't Want To Change The World*. "There was a strip bar just down the road, so I was playing around on the guitar doing a go-go dance riff like, 'YEAH, THAT'S RIGHT, WE'RE OUT FOR ASS'," remembers Zakk. "And then Ozzy comes in, like, 'What the hell is that?!' and I'm like, 'It's just a joke', and he was like, 'Keep that in' – and we ended up getting a Grammy for it!"

So much of *No More Tears* hinged on gambles being taken, but stylistically the record was as proud and confident as anything Ozzy had produced since his 1980 debut, *Blizzard Of Ozz*. With the production team in place, all that remained was to ensure the players were primed. Zakk was a given, as were long-term collaborators Randy on drums and John Sinclair on keyboards.

Bass was a trickier prospect, however – Ozzy had recruited Mike Inez as part of the official band, but there were concerns about how quickly he could fit into the studio unit. As such, Mike was credited with 'inspiration and musical direction', but didn't actually play on the record, which was instead done by long-time Ozzy collaborator Bob Daisley. That didn't stop Mike from contributing one of the most iconic parts of the record – the bass intro to the album's title track. "We didn't have the title of the album when we first went in to do pre-production," Ozzy says. "We'd written the album and Mike Inez joined the band on bass, coming out with *that* bass line."

"The whole album was just a very cool group effort," Duane says. "We were there every minute so we could help guide the ship, but mostly whoever was in the studio at the time would shape how things came out. Zakk had a real vision for it and I think he was insanely dedicated to that."

Released on September 17, 1991, *No More Tears* arrived just as the rock landscape was shifting seismically. Metallica's *Black Album* had already redefined what success looked like for heavy metal, while the likes of Pearl Jam's *Ten*, Soundgarden's *Badmotorfinger* and Nirvana's

"I SAT THERE SMELLING SHIT FOR HOURS BEFORE I REALISED"

OZZY OSBOURNE

PRESS/MATT MAHURIN

Ozzy: carrying on carrying on

Nevermind ultimately ushered in the advent of grunge. Against such a stacked backdrop, Ozzy proved he could still stand with the best, unyielding against the changing tides. For his efforts, the album became one of his best-selling releases, certified platinum before the end of 1991, and four times platinum as of 2021.

"Of course, the record label were the geniuses who supported it all along when it became a success," Duane says. "We didn't care – we accomplished what we set out to do; it breathed new life into Ozzy."

For a moment in the early 90s, it looked like *No More Tears* would be Ozzy's swansong, a mistaken diagnosis of multiple sclerosis prompting the decision to 'retire' (it didn't stick). "What can you do?" Ozzy says pragmatically of the diagnosis. "I've now been told I've got Parkinson's – you've just got to carry on as best you can."

Thirty years on, Ozzy Osbourne is still carrying on as best he can. With a new album on the way, and his looming No More Tours 2 – originally scheduled for 2018, but delayed due to health issues and the pandemic – Ozzy still seems as obstinate now as he was in 1990. "I *know* I've got to stop eventually…" he starts. "But this is the best thing that's ever happened to me. I can't let go of it – it's really hard."

And with that, he's gone – off to a studio to defy expectations, just as he has the past 50-odd years.

A DIGITAL DELUXE EDITION OF *NO MORE TEARS* IS OUT VIA SONY. VINYL IS AVAILABLE AT: HTTPS://OZZYOSBOURNE.LNK.TO/NMTVINYL. HE TOURS THE UK IN FEBRUARY/MARCH 2022

GETTY

"HE'D DROP STINK BOMBS AND RUN OUT CACKLING!"

After then-unknown band Ugly Kid Joe played the Randy Rhoads benefit show in March 1992, Ozzy invited them out on tour. Frontman Whitfield Crane remembers the life-changing experience

HOW DID YOU REACT WHEN YOU HEARD YOU WERE GOING ON TOUR WITH OZZY AND MOTÖRHEAD?
"I remember distinctly being told we were up for the Ozzy tour and wanting it more than anything else I'd ever wanted in my life. Ozzy Osbourne, Motörhead… Ugly Kid Joe? When we got it, we jumped up and down like those people you see in awards shows, in some shitty hotel in Houston or whatever. We were living in a motorhome at that point! All of a sudden, we were hearing through the grapevine that we could get a tour bus. We'd seen one from outside but never been in, so we walked in and it was like, 'No fucking way' – these 23-year-olds on tour with Ozzy Osbourne."

WHAT ARE YOUR MEMORIES OF MEETING OZZY?
"I would go hang out with him and sit in his dressing room. I wanted to be in that dude's shadow so much. He's a hero – he's everybody's hero! I'd even go out and sing soundcheck with the band. Ozzy is a funny dude, though. It was a dry tour because he needed to stay sober, so we were drinking a shit-ton of beer on the down-low, worried that we'd get kicked off the tour for such behaviour. But then Ozzy sent two cases of beer to our room! We thought it was a trick, but he was happy so long as we kept it back in the rooms."

WHAT DID YOU GET UP TO BACKSTAGE?
"We'd come offstage so excited because a crowd kicked ass, and there'd be this knocking at the door – 'kah-kah-KAH!' Every time it was, 'Uh-oh, it's him again', and there he'd be, Ozzy Osbourne in his stage clothes and black eyeliner, like, 'Let me in!' And we were like, 'No!' because he loved to come in and drop these little glass vials with really pungent, disgusting stink bombs and then run out cackling while we had to stay there all night! We hated it, but come on… we loved it."

ICE NINE KILLS

EVIL NEVER DIES

With Ice Nine Kills, Spencer Charnas hasn't just created a vessel for his horror and metal obsessions to thrive – he's built a home for fellow misfits the world over

WORDS: EMMA JOHNSTON • PICTURES: JEREMY SAFFER

Nestled on the north coast of Massachusetts, the charming city of Salem is famous for a shameful chapter in American history. It was here, in 1692–1693, that 19 people were persecuted and killed after being accused of witchcraft. Today, this bleak episode has been transformed into a money-spinner for the descendants of those lost souls. Tourists pour into the town to follow guided trails, visit museums, buy t-shirts and witchy trinkets and take in the Disneyfied, Halloween air of the place. Horror and despair have become entertainment. It was the perfect birthplace, then, for Ice Nine Kills, the highly theatrical metalcore outfit obsessed with the scary side of popular culture.

"I definitely do think growing up there had some effect on my love for the macabre and the spooky side of life," says Spencer Charnas, the band's frontman, creative heart and walking horror encyclopaedia. "You can see where the witches were hanged and stuff like that. That sinister, historical nature that was so close to where I grew up – it probably, subconsciously, had somewhat of an effect on me. The whole idea of being the black sheep or people being afraid of what's different, I think made me gravitate towards stuff that would maybe make other people squirm."

Today Spencer is talking via Zoom from an extraordinarily un-spooky, generic hotel room in Greensboro, North Carolina, sitting on the floor in front of an unmade bed. Yesterday was a day off, which he spent chilling out, watching movies. After our conversation he'll pick up the tour bag he has packed next to him, heading off to play a club show,

"HORROR MOVIES PROVIDE AN OUTLET FOR PEOPLE'S DEMONS"

SPENCER CHARNAS

Spencer Charnas: INK's resident evil genius

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something he missed terribly during the pandemic lockdowns. "It's been good to get back on the road after so long," he says with a smile.

For his fans, Spencer thrills by embodying the world's favourite fictional bogeymen, from Pennywise the clown from *It* to *American Psycho*'s Patrick Bateman. The band's newest album, *The Silver Scream 2: Welcome To Horrorwood*, again plunders the horror movie vaults for inspiration, a new round of videos weaving a creepy narrative that has fans hooked and waiting for the next instalment. But in person, he's disarmingly ordinary. Driven, clearly, but any spooks or scares are saved for showtime. The kid whose teachers noted on his kindergarten report card that he "claims to have seen *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*" has grown up to play out his schlock fantasies without falling too far down the rabbit hole.

The son of a lawyer father and dental hygienist mother, Spencer first felt that tingle of anticipation browsing the VHS rental section of his local grocery store, when he spotted the cover of *Halloween* with the pumpkin and butcher knife design. A confident and outgoing child, he was always happy to be the centre of attention, performing in local talent shows. "I always enjoyed being onstage," he says. "And I was always the kid that the other parents were like, 'I don't know if he should go over to Spencer's because you're gonna end up watching something that's gonna give you nightmares.'"

A close-knit and supportive family, the Charnases were also very scholarly, with various cousins and Spencer's sister attending Ivy League colleges. The latter now works as a psychologist, and the siblings enjoy debating his interest in all things slasher.

"She always kind of looks at it as, you know, do horror movies and violent music have an effect on actual people's tendencies? Does it cause rage? For me, I think that horror movies and music that have violent imagery provide an outlet for people's demons. It sort of makes death *less* scary, because you associate it with your favourite movies, or your favourite band. So I think it has a positive effect on society. If you're crazy, and you're gonna kill people, it's not gonna be because of *Friday The 13th*. And if there was a serial killer that was actually inspired by horror films, don't you think we'd have heard about that?"

He points out that his adoration of horror crosses over with his love of comedy, likening the former genre to a rollercoaster, a "safe scare". So while his prized possessions include a Ghostface mask from *Scream* signed by Wes Craven, along with a bloody lamp from *Scream 4* (at the moment he's working on acquiring a harpoon from *Jaws* to display in his bathroom), there's no sense of him living a shadowy, creep-show life, or trying to freak people out in conversation. The band have filmed videos on the sets of famous horror movies, but he draws the line at real-life terror. Nine Inch Nails may have recorded in the house where the Manson murders took place, but Spencer has no interest in following Trent Reznor down that bleak path, or writing about true crime.

"If you start to get into the real killings, it loses a lot of its fun. I prefer the fake death route. Songs about true crimes and serial killers, it seems a bit more like blood money to me. I'd rather keep it fun, a bit more lighthearted."

Just as his interest in gory film was piqued, Spencer discovered metal through a friend of his uncle's, who worked at Elektra Records and introduced him to Metallica's music. The move to more extreme sounds came from an unlikely source – the 1994 Jim Carrey comedy *Ace Ventura: Pet Detective*, which featured a cameo by Cannibal Corpse. Things have come full circle on *Welcome To Horrorwood*, which includes an appearance from their frontman, Corpsegrinder, on the *My Bloody Valentine*-inspired *Take Your Pick*.

"I've never actually met him, this was just all set up through the pandemic," Spencer explains. "I was just so glad that he liked the song and was willing to do the feature, but he seems like such a sweet guy."

"CORPSEGRINDER SEEMS LIKE SUCH A SWEET GUY"
SPENCER CHARNAS

It's all far removed from the ska-punk band that the frontman started in high school, but that initial point can still be detected in their melodies. More tellingly, Spencer reveals that he's a huge fan of musical theatre, having seen *Les Misérables* and *The Phantom Of The Opera* as a kid and getting hooked on the high drama of it all – to this day, he books tickets for a show whenever he's in London. This influence adds a pleasingly camp edge to proceedings, a sense of silliness many people overlook because they're blinded by all the blood.

"We're not taking ourselves too seriously with this stuff," he admits. "There's always sort of a wink to the camera. Everything is done tongue-in-cheek. Which is so funny when I hear people say, like, 'Oh, that band is cheesy.' I'm like, 'Yeah, no shit.' Ever seen any of the 80s slasher movies? You just don't get it? It's supposed to be that way. Because that's what we love."

Bandmates have come and gone over the years, but Spencer has remained a constant. He went to college for a couple of years but his heart wasn't in academia – it was all or nothing with music, unwavering as INK battled to get signed, to build an audience, to get people to sit up and notice them. "I think it's always been in my blood to be relentless," he says. "My parents used to say that about me all the time."

Despite batting away suggestions he might be a control freak, it is obvious that he has a very clear vision for the band, and beyond. The bit of acting he has done, in a film called *The Retaliators*, has given him a taste of life in front of the camera ("I get a gun shoved in my mouth. And then my tongue is cut out, which was kind of interesting," he says), but far from waiting for fame to come to him, he's taking matters into his own hands with the band's videos, short films with a serial-killer narrative woven through them. It's a very modern way of making a movie episodically, away from the Hollywood system, and it's led to collaborations with actors he has long admired – horror titan Bill Moseley plays the police captain hunting Spencer down in the most recent series. And of all the ghouls he has portrayed in the clips, there is a clear favourite in the song *Hip To Be Scared*.

"Patrick Bateman was just super-fun," he says. "I've loved that book, and it's such a funny movie. It's almost more of a comedy to me than a horror movie. He's such an asshole, but in the world of theatre, sometimes those characters are just so much more fun to play."

The final, crucial part of the INK puzzle, though, is the fans. Every time the band announce a songtitle, there's a frenzy of speculation as their followers try to work out which movie it's going to spoof. They were the ones who called for a song based on Chucky from *Child's Play*, and INK were happy to oblige with *Assault & Batteries*. There's a thriving merch arm, one graphic novel – *Inked In Blood* – is out, and there's a novelisation of *Silver Scream* in the works. More videos are planned, as are bigger and more ambitious shows, including a slot at Download festival next summer. But at the heart of it all is the community, a collective of like-minded geeks who look to the band ▶

"Guys, I'm not part of the rider!"

to brighten their day if they're having a rough time. An app, Psychos Only, is their home, and it's welcoming an ever-growing army of INK obsessives.

"I think of it as INKstagram," says Spencer. "Everyone is just really supportive of each other and they're all just there for the love of music and horror and Ice Nine Kills. And it's cool that you don't see any of the toxic kind of crap that you see on Twitter or other social media, where people are constantly saying negative things about each other, trying to bring one another down or making fun of people for what they listen to. It's nice to see our fans are just completely the opposite."

Those fans are calling the INK name, so it's time for Spencer to head out and spread the thrill of the chill to an adoring North Carolina crowd. Deadly intentions have never seemed so positive.

***THE SILVER SCREAM 2: WELCOME TO HORRORWOOD* IS OUT ON OCTOBER 15 VIA FEARLESS**

KILL OR BE KILLED

The five best movie murders, according to Spencer Charnas

HALLOWEEN (1978)
"One of the classic kills comes where he picks up that guy and he nails him against the wall. The guy's stuck there and Michael Myers is just looking at him and turning his head; it's such a simple kill with a butcher knife, but it's so effective. I just did a convention, with the guy that plays Bob [John Michael Graham], the victim in that scene. We shared an Uber ride back to the airport; he was just such a nice guy."

SILENT NIGHT, DEADLY NIGHT (1984)
"This lady gets impaled on deer antlers that are hanging on the wall. It's just one of those kills, it's very creative, very resourceful. It's like, 'OK, I'm holding up this person. How do I kill them? OK, well, those are very sharp objects that are nailed to the wall. Might as well just impale them on that.'"

PET SEMATARY (1989)
"The original *Pet Sematary*, where the little boy Gage gets hit by the truck, is such a disturbing kill. For our song that is based on *Pet Sematary*, *Funeral Derangements*, we were able to get the actor who played the little boy in the original movie [Miko Hughes] to play the truck driver in our music video. So it's kind of like that full-circle moment where he's killing himself."

FREDDY'S DEAD: THE FINAL NIGHTMARE (1991)
"Freddy Krueger kills this kid who has a hearing aid and cuts his ear off. It's one of the most disturbing but fun kills in the *Nightmare On Elm Street* franchise, and we were lucky enough to work with the actor who played the victim [Ricky Dean Logan, who plays a security guard in the video for *Stabbing In The Dark*]."

AMERICAN PSYCHO (2000)
"The Paul Allen [axe] kill in *American Psycho* is so iconic. And it was so much fun to play around with that scene for a music video, and I got to kill Jacoby from Papa Roach. He was really into it. We keep joking; I got to cut his life into pieces, to sort of memorialise his song. It's such a perfect blend of power and humour, he's dancing and talking about Huey Lewis. And I think that completely encompasses everything that we try to do with our band. It's scary, it's funny, and violent."

"I GET MY TONGUE CUT OUT"
SPENCER CHARNAS

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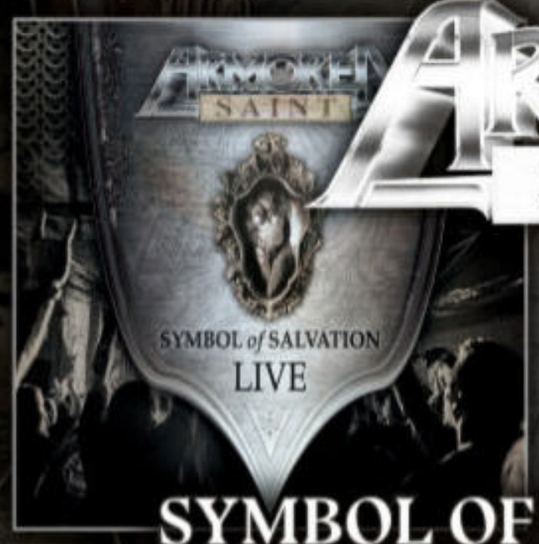

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THE HAMMER INTERVIEW

DANI FILTH

Appearing on *Never Mind The Buzzcocks*. Collaborating with Bring Me The Horizon. Partying with Kesha?! Despite being mocked by the mainstream and derided by the underground, Dani's turned Cradle Of Filth into a corpsepainted British Institution

WORDS: RICH HOBSON • PICTURES: JAMES SHARROCK

CRADLE OF FILTH

Dani Filth: Suffolk's finest (sorry, Mr Sheeran)

Kvlt purists might argue that Cradle of Filth aren't really black metal, but Dani Filth doesn't really care. After all, he's played – and partied – with just about every major extreme metal band to come out of Europe since the early 90s, and seen his band become a bona fide metal institution. *Nymphetamine* even earned the band a Grammy nomination in 2004 – although they lost. "To a Motörhead cover of a Metallica song, of all things!" he scoffs, referring to *Whiplash*. "It's just a bunch of people who know nothing about music saying, 'I've heard of them, so I'll vote for them.'"

Nonetheless, the record cemented Cradle's reputation and proved to be the gateway for many teens to get into the hard stuff. They've continued to expand, crafting ever-grander-sounding records while retaining the abyssal heaviness that spawned them. Now on album #13, *Existence Is Futile*, they grapple with existentialism with a typically baroque sense of bombast.

Hammer caught up with Dani fresh from the band's triumphant return to the stage at Bloodstock 2021 to talk 30 years of Cradle, crossing over into pop culture and partying on the beach with Kesha… You couldn't make it up.

You were born in 1973 in Hertford and were raised in Suffolk. What was it like growing up there?

"My mum was still in school – she had me when she was 16. My grandpa ran the town hall and was the caretaker, so they had this massive apartment there. But my dad got a job at British Telecom and we moved to various villages around Suffolk – Trimley, Woodbridge, Hadleigh and eventually Ipswich."

You've written about Suffolk's witch lore. Did that facilitate your interest in the darker sides of life?

"Absolutely! Lavenham is just up the road, the site of the witch burnings that were in the Vincent Price movie *Witchfinder General*. I used to rent a house that was built in 1685 and [witchfinder general] Matthew Hopkins stayed there. Couple that with getting into monster movies… I got the bug when I saw John Landis being interviewed for a *Thriller* documentary, which included clips of *An American Werewolf In London*, which blew me away."

How did metal factor in?

"I got into 80s heavy metal that was in unison with that [horror] feel. I got into thrash quickly because a friend gave me a mixtape with Plasmatics, W.A.S.P., Piledriver, Razor and Slayer. All that in

conjunction with living somewhere with a very dark history, it couldn't help but rub off. Plus, if you're into literature like I am, you're basically fucked!"

Did your parents influence your taste?
"My mum hated it all! I ordered *Reign In Blood* and got it for Christmas 1986 on import. I remember sneaking in and listening to the album, then putting it back like it'd never been opened. Sorry, mum! I was listening to it really loud on Christmas Day and she yelled, 'TURN THAT SHIT OFF!' My dad was a well-known reggae collector, so we'd have people round the house with funny-smelling cigarettes. I fucking hated reggae but dad got me into music as he got me a record player and a tape deck."

Your original plan was to go into journalism. What changed?
"I was supposed to go work for *East Anglian Daily Times* and was very excited but at the last minute they decided they didn't want to do it. So I went to work for my village paper shop, which I delivered papers for anyway. I just thought, 'Fuck all this, I hate working shitty jobs.' I've not had a proper job, it's always been bands and now I'm 48 – that's a lengthy spell of unemployment."

Did being a prodigious reader influence Cradle's verbose lyrical style?
"One of the things my dad got me into when I was young was science fiction novels – I loved *The War Of The Worlds*. I even auditioned for the part Jason Donovan got [Parson Nathaniel] in the Jeff Wayne *War Of The Worlds* musical. When I auditioned they had Phil Lynott's tapes and it was like hearing a ghost – he talks between tracks, laughs and you can hear him taking drags from a cigarette. I was close, but wasn't an opera singer. I even went to Jeff Wayne's house – which I call Wayne Manor – and spent a whole evening in his office chatting about *War Of The Worlds* until his wife kicked us out. My dad got me into all of that stuff; H.G. Wells, John Wyndham, Dennis Wheatley. I've still got those books in my library – I loved it because it was very Hammer Horror."

How did your parents react when you said you were doing Cradle full time?
"I don't think they were best pleased because I was living at home and my future wife moved into my bedroom. I convinced myself I was taking a year off, but normally when you do that you go travelling or something and I hadn't got money to do that! I could see on my mum and dad's face they weren't happy I was on the dole, so I made a pact with myself and [then-guitarist] Paul Ryan, who actually had a job and would drive us, that we'd make a proper go of it."

How were things in the early days of Cradle?
"I'd draw and design covers for various underground fanzines in exchange for interviews, and every day I'd be down the post office trading tapes. I'd also do interviews from telephone boxes and get people banging on the door because I'd been in there an hour!"

Is it true that the first Cradle record was wiped when the label went out of business? What did it sound like?
"I'm grateful it was deleted. It sounded like early The Gathering or Therion, European death metal with keyboards and choirs. It was pretty good, but had that come out we'd have been tied to this god-awful label. It was a fucker at the time, but it was one of the best things that could've happened to us."

"I AUDITIONED FOR THE PART THAT JASON DONOVAN GOT"

How linked did you feel to the wider black metal and extreme metal scenes?
"We were right in the thick of it. Early on we went to Portugal for our first time abroad and headlined a festival with Hypocrisy and Moonspell; it took off from there. I was already tape trading with Euronymous [co-founder of Mayhem] and guys from Impaled Nazarene, Magus of Necromantia – loads of people, because you had to back then. That's how we migrated to the black metal side of things."

What's your standout memory of touring with Emperor in July 1993?
"It was only four shows, and in Edinburgh we played to three people – it was like *Bad News*. We played at the Royal Court in Liverpool then had a massive party. [Emperor drummer] Bård Faust came up to me pissed out his head and told me about murdering a gay guy. I dismissed it as a load of crap but when it all came out I felt like an accessory to murder after the fact. But if anyone had seen Emperor at that time, they'd never have taken them seriously. There's, like, Samoth, Lord Of Silence, but he wasn't Lord Of Silence that night – he was Lord Of Giggles And Laughter. Nick [Barker, Cradle's then-drummer] was pretending he was Uncle Fester, playing this keyboard, and everybody was either high or taking Es, drinking – all fucked."

How did you feel when the stories started coming out – Faust's arrest, Euronymous's murder and the church burnings etc?
"It was all very sensationalist. At the time, *Kerrang!* were horrible and obnoxious about Cradle. I went with the label manager of Cacophonous [Neil Harding] to have this meeting with [veteran rock writer] Geoff Barton. I pushed him over his desk and Neil wrote symbols on their door in black lipstick. They called the police."

What happened next?
"I had to go to the headquarters of the crime division in Regent Street and they pulled out a massive dossier, slammed it on the desk and inside was loads of black metal fanzines. They asked us, 'Are you a Satanic band? Are you about to start a Satanic war like the bands in Europe?' They had dossiers of other bands, so we told them it was a stupid act of rebellion and they let us go."

What was the most kvlt thing Cradle did back then?
"Fortunately we didn't get sucked in and didn't do anything stupid. We once went to a very famous church on a hill that had apparently been burned down by Satanists in the 70s. We went up with torches and had a woman naked on the altar with blood everywhere, and the villagers came up to us like they were literally there to burn witches."

In 1996 you signed to Music For Nations. Did you feel like you were getting closer to mainstream success? Is that something you wanted?
"Oh definitely – they'd got nice offices! By that point we'd shed off the skin of doing things in the underground – we'd paid our dues, too many. Cradle became a flagship band – I even started doing a column for *Metal Hammer*. Things blossomed for us and we embraced it. I don't believe in this waffle you get from some bands that selling 30,000 albums every five years is fine. Bollocks, that's all you can do! We were never going to be Metallica – we're too extreme for that – but we were prepared to take what we could."

What was the experience of acting in *Cradle Of Fear* in 2001 like?
"It was all done on the sly, utilising people we knew. We had offices and it was quite a big thing – we even had a guy once give us a big jar of funds he'd collected for us to make *Cradle Of Fear 2*. It was great, but to revisit it would be a lot of work. Making that movie now ▶

When the lights come on at 6am in Slimelight...

would probably cost a million quid – catering companies don't come cheap!"

You were on the UK quiz show *Never Mind The Buzzcocks* in 2001. How did the other people treat you?
"They were a bit brilliant, a bit cunty. Mark Lamarr had this ferrety little guy who was so rude to the point where I'd had enough in the end and I punched him in the green room. I enjoyed it as an experience, but it was taxing. My favourite memory is they put all these clowns on and humiliated them, as they do. I was getting on really well with this presenter, Lisa Rogers, who'd smuggled a bottle of drink on and was sharing it. Halfway through the episode I needed the loo, and all the clowns were in there lined up in a row at the urinals! All of them were cursing Mark so I hung out with them in there for a bit."

You've had a lot of line-up changes. Have you ever acted like a dictator?
"It's always been a band effort, but people sometimes misconstrue that as I'm the only one that's survived. I've only sacked two people in the history of our 32 members – the rest drift away or go elsewhere. Now we've got a great fucking band and I love them to bits."

How comfortable are you with being a household name and a byword for weirdness in the UK?
"I guess we'll play *Nymphetamine* until we die! I once did a press trip with Joey Tempest of Europe and everyone would ask him, 'How does it feel to only be remembered for *The Final Countdown*?' He just went, 'Brilliant, we got good money from it and it's better than not writing *The Final Countdown!*' I wish *I'd* fucking written *The Final Countdown*!"

"I FELT LIKE AN ACCESSORY TO MURDER"

What was it like doing the video for *Wonderful Life* with Bring Me The Horizon in 2019?
"My daughter loves Bring Me so she's in the video as well, in the background. They didn't close that supermarket – it looks empty, but it was packed and we just took the opportunity whenever an aisle was empty. I'll always be a fan of crossovers, though; one of the best festivals we ever did had us and The Sisters Of Mercy headline on different days. It's just on a beach; a fucking amazing festival full of pop bands and us as a token metal band – we hung out with Kesha all night. I did a rap thing with this band Twiztid recently as well [the song *Neon Vamp*], that was great."

Ed Sheeran recently said he used to be into Cradle Of Filth. What was it like to hear that?
"He's from Suffolk, so I imagine he appreciates anyone that comes from the vicinity; he recently had The Darkness support him too. We've exchanged emails a few times and he seems very down-to-earth even though he's worth, like, £5million when we're worth like £250!"

Doug Bradley has appeared on four of your albums, and is on the new one. Why is there such an affinity between you two?
"Tony Todd [of *Candyman* fame] was originally supposed to be on [2008's] *Godspeed On The Devil's Thunder*. I've got a recording of it, but his management never broached the concept, so when he was reading out all these quotes – and there were more than appeared on the record, all taken from trial transcripts when [15th century serial killer of children] Gilles de Rais was arrested – he just goes, 'I can't do this' and leaves. You can literally hear the door slamming! So it was a quick call… 'Doooooug!' and he had no problem."

The new album is called *Existence Is Futile*. How do you cope with existential dread?
"In the credits, the original title was *Existence is Futile… Worship Everything* but that was a bit too long. That's the band's maxim. If there are no gods we are not bound by cosmic rules beyond what you can and can't do. We're not governed by some absentee landlord, so we're masters of our destiny."

***EXISTENCE IS FUTILE* IS OUT ON OCT 22 VIA NUCLEAR BLAST**

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“HE’D BE OF US”

SO PROUD

When Mastodon's beloved manager died in 2018, it was the latest in a line of heartbreaks to rock the four bandmates. Not for the first time, they poured their grief into something beautiful

WORDS: ELEANOR GOODMAN • PICTURES: CLAY PATRICK McBRIDE

Brann Dailor felt nervous as he pressed the phone to his ear. It was 2004, and he'd spent the last few weeks talking to potential managers for Mastodon, ahead of the release of second album *Leviathan*. But all of them had been too slick, too LA, too busy looking around the corner for the next best thing to come along.

Nick John was different. Part of Rick Sales Entertainment Group, which managed the legendary Slayer, he'd extended the hand of friendship after Brann had got his number from a mutual friend and cold-called to ask for hiring advice. They'd spoken eight times since, getting on like a house on fire. Nick's storied insight would be useful, Brann reasoned, but because he had Tom Araya and co on the books, he wouldn't be interested in taking on Mastodon. Now, Brann was about to ask him to do exactly that.

"I told the band I was gonna pop the question," he quips, speaking via Zoom from Atlanta. "I was nervous, because I'm afraid of rejection, like most human beings. I waited nine dates to ask!"

Nick agreed immediately, and met Mastodon on July 23, the day they played New Jersey's Hellfest. Driving together in a minivan, they talked, and talked, and talked about the band's hopes for the future. The afternoon the band signed with him, they landed the Slipknot/Slayer Unholy Alliance tour in Europe and the UK. "We were off to the races," smiles Brann.

Giving feedback on their riffs, gossiping about Slayer, and bringing his warmth, enthusiasm and dry humour to their day-to-day lives, Nick became Mastodon's constant companion and champion. Every time the Atlantans had a new demo or finished masters for an album, Nick and his wife Colleen would head to their living room, crack open a bottle of wine and blast it as loud as it would go. He shared in Mastodon's successes, and they brought him joy. "He was a big cheerleader for us," says Brann. "Our trust in him was marrow-deep."

So in January 2018, when Nick told the band he was unable to attend the Grammys – they'd been nominated for Best Metal Performance for seventh album *Emperor Of Sand* – they knew something was seriously wrong. Although he'd been ill and having tests, he wouldn't tell them his diagnosis for another few months – but Brann had a lurching, instinctive realisation: "He has cancer."

He was right. Nick had pancreatic cancer. Yet Brann remained positive, refusing to acknowledge that the worst could happen, and giving his buddy the encouragement he needed. "You don't believe there's any chance it will actually end in the person dying, which is a good attitude," he affirms. "And that's how we all guard ourselves from having to confront the spectre of death; you just sidestep it."

The pair were in touch a lot, texting rather than calling because Nick couldn't use his vocal cords. That was disturbing enough for Brann, but as Nick sent through photos from chemo, he had an inkling things were getting rough. When he visited him on July 4, 2018, while on tour with Primus, all optimism dissolved. "I had never seen anyone so sick," he remembers. "It blew me away. After seeing him that day, I emerged with this feeling of dread. I was thinking to myself, 'I don't know how someone comes back from being as sick as he is right now.'"

Bassist Troy Sanders was at his son's baseball practice when he got the call that Nick had passed away. It was Saturday September 8, 2018, Troy's birthday. And although the news was utterly devastating, it was not unexpected.

A week earlier, management had cancelled Mastodon's North American tour with Dinosaur Jr. and suggested they fly to Nick's bedside to say their farewells. The cancer had weakened him greatly and he was passing in and out of consciousness, so there, inside his quiet house, they told him they loved him and offered reassurance.

"I HAD NEVER SEEN ANYONE SO SICK"

BRANN DAILOR

"It was the worst thing I've ever seen in my life. I'd never been in someone's presence when they were in that physical state of near nothingness," says Troy, via videocall from his study. "He kept saying he was sorry this was happening, because he felt like he was burdening us. We were like, 'No, *we're* sorry this is happening. You're in terrific pain, close your eyes and sleep, you're the best."

Mastodon are no strangers to loss. In 2009 they released *Crack The Skye*, a heartfelt tribute to Brann's sister Skye, who died by suicide when they were kids; 2011's *The Hunter* honoured guitarist Brent Hinds' brother, who passed away on a hunting trip; while

Mastodon (clockwise from top right): Brent Hinds, Bill Kelliher, Troy Sanders, Brann Dailor

making 2018's *Emperor Of Sand*, guitarist Bill Kelliher's mother passed away from cancer. But this was the first time *Troy* had experienced the death of someone close, and after writing lyrics for Mastodon's eighth album – which would eventually be titled *Hushed And Grim*, and sprawl to double length – he was hit with a startling realisation.

"All my lyrics were part of the Stages Of Grief, that I didn't recognise until it was all done," he says. "It started out with layers of anger and frustration; I was so mad that something so horrific could take something so beautiful."

One of the first songs they wrote was *The Crux*, an urgent, tense affair that gives way to a question: *'Underneath a cloud of silence, you journey into the rift / Will time defy the weight of you leaving us.'* Another was *Sickle And Peace*, with its dramatic chorus about the horror and grace of the inevitable: *'Death comes and brings with him sickle and peace / Shelter from storms comes with long flowing robes.'* Heartrending and intimate, the record bows under the weight of grief, with imagery of ash, and of clawing, scraping and washing away – yet it also elevates Nick and his legacy.

One night, towards the end of 2020, Troy was walking on the beach near his home in Florida when he felt something inside him shift. "For the first time, a positive feeling washed over me of, 'Wow, I'm so glad that our relationship happened.' It's horrible that he's gone and I'm still here, but I felt the completeness of being touched by his amazingness."

To honour these feelings, he wrote the shining, comforting *Skeleton Of Splendour*, telling Nick: *'Now you sleep, we'll finish your work.'* "It was almost like a letter of thanks to him," explains Troy. "It hit me how important it was that I had come full circle with these emotions."

Brann was getting a haircut in early 2020 when he realised he was having a panic attack. "I was sitting there freaking out," he recalls. "I was thinking, 'How fucking bizarre would it be if I just got up and walked out of here?' Because that's what I felt like doing. But I sat there and went through it, and the lady had no idea. I wasn't showing signs of anything."

It was right before the pandemic, and as well as grieving for Nick, he was grappling with issues regarding his mum and some of his closest relationships. In the words of contemporary trauma research, the body keeps the score. "I was *so* stressed out at that period of time," he remembers. "That's when I started drawing my clowns."

His daily clown drawings, which we reported on in *Metal Hammer* 338, were art therapy; a way of expressing hopes and fears, and of focusing his mind on a recurring, absorbing task to stop it wandering into darkness. And when Brann came to pen his lyrics for *Hushed And Grim*, he channelled everything he was experiencing: the complex gutpunch of loss, panicky feelings of isolation and desperation, extreme mental exhaustion, and uncertainty about the future and if things would ever return to normal.

Without the cover of a big, fantastical concept, such as *Crack The Skye*'s Rasputin story, the evil *Emperor Of Sand*, or the appearance of mythical monsters, *Hushed And Grim* includes some of Brann's most raw and intimate lyrics yet. *Pushing The Tides* is a visceral response to his panic attacks, while one particularly poignant line of *More Than I Could Chew* asks: *'Will there ever be a place that I can hide and heal these open sores / Or do I have to cut them out and eat them as my people adore.'* He is referring to interviews like this, and to the stage; spaces that require him to rehash his pain.

"There's a part of me that gives too much," he admits. "But I can't help it. I'm a people-pleaser, so it's my own fault. But the only way I can understand what happened to me is to write about it in the music."

Is it worth it?

"I don't know that it is. Maybe it is," he considers. "I think that's something that reveals itself later. I did that with *Crack The Skye*. I'll tell you what, *nobody* in my family wants to talk about that ever, at all. Not that they want to forget about her, but it's too painful. So they're like, 'Nope! Pass the mashed potatoes!' But there I was, opening myself up to questions. No lie, an interviewer got on the phone with me, and his first question, right out of the gate, was: 'So, your sister committed suicide. Let's talk about that.' I was like, '*Holy shit*.'"

Since opening up about Skye's death, though, he's received messages from grateful fans who have felt less alone in their hurt. "There's always the hope that you're helping somebody. So maybe down the road this record will help somebody out of a tough situation, and then it'll be worth it."

Hushed And Grim might not have a grand, theatrical concept, but it does have a more subtle one that ties into the artwork: when you die, your soul goes into the heart of a tree, where it goes ▶

Mastodon have poured their heart, soul and lots of love into *Hushed And Grim*

through the four seasons. You see your life as a movie highlights reel that shows the ups and the downs – and then you say goodbye.

It's not something that Brann believes in, though. He was only 15 when Skye died, and found himself asking questions: What happens at an autopsy? What did she go through? But it makes for a soothing alternative afterlife mythology. "Nobody's comfortable with me telling them that

"IT WAS LIKE A LETTER OF THANKS TO NICK"

TROY SANDERS

the lights just go off, and it's like your deepest, dreamless sleep," Brann notes wryly. "There's no *fun* in that."

The album's sleeve, by longtime collaborator Paul Romano, features a mighty, sturdy specimen of a tree with Nick John at the base, depicted as the Green Man. His wife, Colleen, has given her approval, and the band kept her in the loop throughout the making of the record. Although their biggest cheerleader will never know what they've created in his name, Brann's sure he'd approve, too. "I feel like he'd be so proud of us," he says. "There's a lot on here that he'd be flipping out about."

One of those things is Soundgarden guitarist Kim Thayil's solo on the lighter-waving, grunge-inflected slowie *Had It All* – "he'd be blown away," smiles Brann. It's also a song Troy loves deeply; he composed it on an acoustic guitar, and asked his mum to play the French horn on it. "She had never been in a proper recording studio before. She's always played church functions, and in orchestras, so the whole experience was a bit mind-blowing for her," he smiles.

But perhaps the most moving song is album closer *Gigantium*. After 80 minutes marking life's bittersweet qualities, it's a slow-motion cry of anguish, followed by a monument of love to Nick John. The first section transpired when Brann was in the thick of emotional torment and living at the band's West End Sound studio; their engineer, Tom Tapley, knew what he was going through and offered to come by and demo some material with him. "They were pretty raw moments for me," he remembers. "I wanted to run, get away from everything, and pretend none of it was happening."

The second part came a few months later, its uplifting, hymn-like, string-augmented composition sending shivers down the spine. "I love the last line: *'The mountains we made in the distance will stay with us.'* It's basically telling Nick that everything we did together still exists, and always will," explains Brann. "And I love that ending riff and guitar solo; it feels like you're driving a car on a long desert road that just goes on, and on, and on. Yeah it's sad, but it's gonna be OK. There's some resolve there."

Hushed And Grim is a long listen. Difficult to wrap your head around in the first instance, at times uncomfortably naked, but undoubtedly the most mature and fully realised album Mastodon have produced in their 21-year career. By the time you get to the end, your chest heavy with vicarious heartache, you could be forgiven for thinking: is it *really* better to have loved and lost, than to have never loved at all?

"Undoubtedly yes," replies Troy. "In life, *and* after his death, Nick's continued to make me a better person. It makes that gift of life fuller, that I am able to continue, and musically reflect and give back the greatness he's touched me with."

"Of course," shoots back Brann. "It hurts so much because you cared so much about that person while they were here. You wouldn't trade those memories for anything in the world." H

***HUSHED AND GRIM* IS OUT ON OCTOBER 29 VIA REPRISE**

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EDITED BY: JONATHAN SELZER • PICTURE: STEPHANIE CABRAL

MASTODON

Hushed And Grim

REPRISE

Atlanta's progressive riffmasters embark on their boldest adventure yet

WRITTEN AND RECORDED under a cloud of grief, following the death of longtime manager Nick John in September 2018, Mastodon's eighth full-length album was always destined to be a heavyweight affair. The creative breathing space that many seem to have enjoyed in the midst of a global pandemic may have also contributed to the fact that *Hushed And Grim* is absolutely monumental, in both size and scope.

AN ALBUM THAT'S MONUMENTAL IN SIZE AND SCOPE

As a tribute to a fallen comrade, it could hardly be more effusive, substantial or expansive. It also feels like a genuine leap into fresh territory, in a way that neither 2017's *Emperor Of Sand* nor 2014's *Once More 'Round The Sun* did. Those albums were rightly acclaimed and demonstrated that Mastodon were still evolving, but the electrified muscularity of *Leviathan* and *Blood Mountain* was slowly being polished away, replaced by more radio-friendly, alt-metal clatter of songs like *The Motherload* and Grammy-winner *Sultan's Curse*. *Hushed And Grim* has plenty of massive hooks too, of course, but this is a deeply heavy record, both musically and emotionally, and the fearless, ferocious spirit of those early records is very much in evidence throughout.

Fifteen songs deep and impossible to fully comprehend on a first listen, this is a defiantly old-school endeavour. Mastodon's longest album by a solid 30 minutes, and easily the most adventurous and eccentric record they have ever made, *Hushed And Grim* feels like a love letter to the exploratory prog rock double albums of the 70s, when record label budgets were seemingly limitless and no idea was too daft to be considered. Fortunately, there is nothing remotely daft about the songs that have flowed from the meeting of the foursome's minds this time around. Or, indeed, the riffs.

PRESS

Mastodon have made the most monolithic and heartfelt of eulogies

The opening *Pain With An Anchor* is a rumbling, sinewy torrent of ensemble aggro, with woozy, psychedelic undercurrents and an insidious, keening melody; *The Crux* is a more straightforward Mastodon skull-rattler, but played with punk rock urgency and classic rock swing, a wonderfully insouciant Brett Hinds solo thrown in for extra sparkle. Likewise, recent single *Pushing The Tides* feels like a supremely artful upgrade for beloved Mastodonian tropes: a steroidal, noise rock sprint interspersed with bursts of angular dissonance and a sublime vocal hook to stir any soul.

At the more epic end of the scale, *Hushed And Grim* delivers some of Mastodon's most wild and perverse material yet. *More Than I Could Chew* is a doomy gallop across desert plains, with Mellotron and the ghost of Ennio Morricone lurking with malicious intent in the background; *Peace And Tranquility* is an audacious blend of intricate prog metal trickery and beatific, lysergic Americana; *Gobblers Of Dregs* begins as a mesmerising, slow-motion howl to the heavens, before erupting into a squall of acid-rock abandon.

There are many other astonishing highs and startling curveballs here too; *Hushed And Grim* is 86 minutes long and, thankfully, never less than completely fascinating. It's also a return to top form, their finest album since *Crack The Skye* and a rich and resonant salute to those we have lost. You can't ask for much more than that.

FOR FANS OF: Baroness, Intronaut, Opeth

DOM LAWSON

1914
Where Weapons And Fear Meet
NAPALM

Ukrainian black metallers poke their heads above the trenches

War is perfect extreme metal material. Events happen on a gigantic scale where empires are built or annihilated and true horror is experienced by those fighting in the mud. Strangely, World War I is rarely touched upon, so Ukraine's 1914 fill a void, especially since a lot of their takes on The Great War are multi-layered, varying in scope and point of view. At over an hour, *Where Weapons And Fear Meet* is an ambitious endeavour. But no matter how stuffed with bombastic orchestral arrangements, the occasional prestigious guest such as Paradise Lost's Nick Holmes, and even a delicate and mournful folkish piece in *Coward*, this third full-length feels overblown and a tad soulless in the long run.

FOR FANS OF: Batushka, God Dethroned, Eastern Front

OLIVIER BADIN

AEON
God Ends Here
METAL BLADE

The Swede sound of victory for returning death metal brutalists

Aeon don't do things by half. While the bruising Swedish five-piece largely adhere to a well-established and familiar blueprint of brutal, no-holds-barred death metal, *God Ends Here* – a somewhat tardy follow-up to 2012's well-received *Aeons Black* – advances with widescreen swagger and epic pomp. It's assisted in no small part by the use of choirs constructed from the sampled voices of guitarist Zeb Nilsson and his youngest daughter, plus programmed orchestral elements courtesy of Nilsson and fellow guitarist Daniel Dlimi. Rather than dilute the aggression, the symphonic aspect, combined with the juggernaut momentum of the instrumentation, results in an album capable of flattening all in its path.

FOR FANS OF: Blood Red Throne, Deicide, Bloodbath

JOSEPH STANNARD

BASTARÐUR
Satan's Loss Of Son
SEASON OF MIST

Frosty crustpunk filth from Sólstafir's post-metal maven

Usually heard conjuring windwept post-metal soundscapes with Sólstafir, Addi Tryggvason seems to have some rage to deal with. *Satan's Loss Of Son* is 28 minutes of hell-for-leather, deeply crusty hardcore punk and scabby-knuckled HM-2 pedal worship, Bastarður's debut salutes and celebrates 30 years of horrible, riff-driven noise. In truth, Addi is unable to completely mask his more cerebral creative urges, and both *Black Flag Fools* and closer *Rise Up* emit faint echoes of the Icelander's alma mater, or at least their trademark, snow-bothered grandeur. But the real point of this thing is to let rip and scream into the night sky, to a soundtrack of clattering d-beats and thuggish, grinding sludge. Achievement unlocked.

FOR FANS OF: Extreme Noise Terror, Inepsy, Discharge

DOM LAWSON

BULLET FOR MY VALENTINE

Bullet For My Valentine

SPINEFARM

Bridgend's metal behemoths cover all the bases

BULLET FOR MY Valentine switched gears on sixth album *Gravity*. Swapping out supercharged ferocity for a more slickly produced, mainstream-baiting affair, it melded catchy grooves with gleaming pop-hook anthemia. Vocalist Matt Tuck predicted that fans would be "surprised" by the record; it did, after all, have one defining – and arguably un-Bullet-like in terms of their previous sonic output – characteristic in its complete omission of guitar solos across its 11 tracks. Depending on what side of the fence you were sat on, it was either fearlessly brave or decidedly foolish given the technical arsenal the guys had at their disposal.

Fast forward three years, however, and on paper the gamble appears to have paid dividends for the Welsh juggernauts, having now racked up a billion US streams of their catalogue and reinvigorating those increasingly apathetic audiences by playing their biggest shows to date, including London's Alexandra Palace. But with Matt Tuck now chucking out bold epithets like "This is the beginning of Bullet 2.0",' and a press release teasing "a back to basics" approach, are the boys from Bridgend finally ready to prove that they're impervious to time's cruel hands?

As a glitchy melange of singles past starts to slowly crackle then fade out, it's certainly impossible to deny yourself that warming frisson of anticipation that opener *Parasite* provides. It's both warranted and duly rewarded as the track builds tantalisingly then lights up like a grenade, exploding in a rabid melee of crashing drums, maniacal screams and arguably the kind of battering-ram strength riffs not heard since *Her Voice Resides* et al first grabbed listeners by the throat.

Shifting seamlessly between gut-punching roars and heady cleans, vocalist Matt sounds better than ever, his vitriolic cries of *'I hope you choke!'* serving as a defiant proclamation for anyone who ever derided them as "false metal" pretenders. And make no mistake: the solos are back and back with a vengeance. Covering similar ground, *Knives* and *My Reverie* revel in rhythmic grooves, irrepressible melodies and huge choruses that will doubtless please those who crave the quartet at their heaviest and lodge themselves firmly in your cranium, while *Paralysed*'s visceral clatter was designed to make you lose your shit in the pit.

So for the record to then lull and dip into much safer territory following the wanton savagery that just burst forth from your speakers is somewhat frustrating. The gang chants of the emo-on-steroids hybrid *Bastards* misses the mark in terms of the chest-thumping bonhomie it's meant to stir. Elsewhere, Matt's lyrics on *Rainbow Veins* fail to bring it to the level of emotional catharsis it seeks, the song's introspective balladry proving too generic to achieve any lasting impact.

Ultimately, this self-titled seventh offering is a decent, all-box-ticking Bullet album that will enamour fans of all eras. And granted, while it doesn't surpass the full-throttle glory of 2006 breakthrough *The Poison*, it's hard to see it delaying what seems like a determined charge back to metal's summits.

FOR FANS OF: Killswitch Engage, Trivium, All That Remains

SOPHIE MAUGHAN

Bullet For My Valentine return to finish the job

***BULLET FOR MY VALENTINE* WILL ENAMOUR FANS OF ALL ERAS**

BLACKWATER HOLYLIGHT
Silence/Motion
RIDING EASY

Portland's psych-doom crew shine through a prism of sorrow

After two solid records, this psych-doom crew have delivered on their kaleidoscopic promise. *Silence/Motion* is the band's quietest and most measured release, but it's also their deepest and most affecting. The trundling trad doom riffs have been scaled back, freeing up space for expansive psychedelic brushstrokes, pulsating krautrock and blurry shoegaze. The soft lull of Allison Faris's voice drifts gracefully amidst thoughtfully crafted riffs, hypnotic bass runs and elegant synth lines, a calm guiding presence that details sadness, trauma and loss without ever descending into self-pity. Members of Thou, Inter Arma and Mizmor guest on the album's opening and closing tracks – moments that are more intense and more overtly 'metal' that neatly bookend this lush and immersive piece of work.

FOR FANS OF: Molassess, Black Moon Mother, Hey Colossus

ALEX DELLER

BLOOD YOUTH
Visions Of Another Hell
RUDE

Harrogate harriers mark the end of an era in bile

Unbeknownst to the Harrogate heavies upon recording in 2020, *Visions Of Another Hell* would be their last effort featuring founding vocalist Kaya Tarsus. It seems fitting that it's their best album to date – a monumental swansong for a frontman who leaves behind large shoes to fill. A maelstrom of intense metal chaos, their third venture spews industrial grit for *Iron Lung* and menacing nu metal melodies on *Cells* and *Body Of Wire* before the poignant metalcore masterpiece of *Open Window* blows everything out of the water. A truly haunting curtain call in the form of slow numbers *Kept In A Box* and *Dogma* brings a compelling effort to a bittersweet close. *Visions...* may be the end of an era, but it's also a solid gold foundation for the start of a bright new one.

FOR FANS OF: Architects, Cane Hill, Slipknot

ALI COOPER

BLOODRED HOURGLASS
Your Highness
OUT OF LINE

Finnish melodeath veterans still genuflecting before the big guns

Ever seen a movie or TV show where the characters go to a dingy biker bar, and the most generic of heavy metal bands are playing in the background? If so, Bloodred Hourglass were probably that band. For 15 years, the Finns have been an average act in melodeath; they add nothing new to their genre, but at least they've proven capable of an exciting song here and there. Their fifth album is no different. Although its 11 tracks pass swiftly, there's precious little to write home about. A few riffs are competent enough at mimicking In Flames and Amon Amarth to elicit a mindless toe-tap, yet genuine earworms are nonexistent. The only exception is *My Prime Of Kneel*, which bounces while adeptly swapping between growls and clean vocals. It's the one standout in an album that's otherwise entirely 'meh' experience.

FOR FANS OF: Insomnium In Flames, Dark Tranquillity

MATT MILLS

THE BREATHING PROCESS
Labyrinthian
UNIQUE LEADER

US symphonic marauders bring majesty to the mosh

Nearing two decades and multiple line-up shifts later, The Breathing Process's fourth studio album lands on Unique Leader's roster, eviscerating yet elevated in its sonic arsenal and aimed directly at the solar plexus. Combining aspects of atmospheric, sprawling black metal with deathcore and symphonic death metal, *Labyrinthian* deftly wields the forces of light and dark in skilled measure. Lacerating blasts and bleak, dirge-like soundscapes encircle one another whilst underneath Chris Rabideau's compendium of growls, Sara Loerlein offers up a choice of jaw-swinging solos throughout the likes of *Wilt* and *Shroud*, with a few guests, including Viscera's Jamie Graham adding, to the filth-addled maelstrom. And where *Heir To None*'s throat-shredding serves up inhumane aggression, *We, The Drowned*'s sumptuous keys closes out the album in majestic fashion.

FOR FANS OF: Abigail Williams, Winds Of Plague, Rose Funeral

SOPHIE MAUGHAN

Cradle Of Filth offer a very warm welcome

CRADLE OF FILTH
Existence Is Futile
NUCLEAR BLAST

Suffolk's Bacchanalian black metallers find elation in nihilism

IT'S TRADITION TO dunk on Cradle Of Filth. They look silly. They're not 'true' black metal. Dani Filth sounds like air being squeezed from a balloon. That's all true, and it makes them one of the UK's most idiosyncratic, endearing extreme acts.

Album 13 dribbles from Cradle's curmudgeonly canon with a unique discharge. It's a different whiff to 2017's *Cryptoriana*, which blasted forth with gunpowder, ghosts and everything its 19th-century English trappings permitted; or *Hammer Of The Witches* two years prior, which plundered the guts of the band's mid-90s material for a medieval, Maiden-worshipping romp.

Existence Is Futile eschews creature features for biblical brutality. Everything about this record is widescreen, from its Hieronymus Bosch-ian artwork to Doug Bradley's guest slot on *Suffer Our Dominion*, during which the bloke who played Pinhead warns us about... overpopulation. Dani's not gone Dead Kennedys; *Crawling King Chaos*'s singalong of *'Apophis, reach dark office'* isn't about, y'know, an actual office – but his Byronic barbs pierce through current issues. Take opener proper, *Existential Terror*, with Martin Škaroupka's snare rolls playing against those irresistible twin leads before Dani lets rip: *'Time to embrace the inevitable, we're all gonna fucking... DIE!'* It's bleak, wicked fun.

Instrumentally, the album's a nuanced rewrite of Cradle's early 2010s output, relying on double-kick and Massacre-styled death metal as much as melody, gothic drama and choral bombast. Part of that comes from the band's eagerness to experiment, like *Discourse Between A Man And His Soul*'s acoustic, folky arpeggio. New keyboardist/co-vocalist Anabelle Iratni also brings assorted snacks to the pity party, sounding imperious through *Black Smoke Curling From The Lips Of War.*

Catchy as sin and packing enough orchestration to straight-up kill Andrew Lloyd Webber, *Existence Is Futile* is the feel-shit hit for these strange times.

FOR FANS OF: Carach Angren, Dimmu Borgir, Mercyful Fate

ALEC CHILLINGWORTH

JAMES SHARROCK/PRESS LEFT: FIONA GARDEN/PRESS

DIABLO SWING ORCHESTRA

Swagger And Stroll Down The Rabbit Hole

CANDLELIGHT/SPINEFARM

Sweden's swing metal circus hits peak bonkers

WHEN FRED DURST'S new facial hair is the most entertaining thing that a lot of people can think of, you know that it is time for Diablo Swing Orchestra to release a new album. Heavy music as mad-eyed escapism is hardly a new phenomenon, but few bands have upheld that noble tradition with quite the same degree of genre-blitzing glee as these eccentric Swedes. Their fifth full-length album will hopefully be released on a sunny day, because from its superb cartoon artwork to the relentless ingenuity of the music within, *Swagger And Stroll Down The Rabbit Hole* is the perfect antidote to greyness and drudgery.

Exuberant to the point of insanity, and yet brimming with great tunes and moments of gentle beauty, this is one of the most action-packed and bewildering hours you will spend this year. The essence of the DSO sound remains intact: metal riffs, swing jazz, gypsy fiddles and any number of unhinged detours, all crammed into meticulously crafted five-minute vignettes. *Swagger And Stroll Down The Rabbit Hole* simply feels like a purposeful upgrade from 2017's *Pacifisticuffs*, with greater emphasis on killer hooks *and* more weirdness at every unexpected turn.

Mischief lurks at the heart of the album's greatest moments. *Celebremos Lo Inevitable* is an out-and-out riot, with accordions set to stun; *Speed Dating An Arsonist* is an electro-pop Charleston gone feral; *Jig Of The Century* is folk metal fed through a spinning prog rock prism; *The Prima Donna Gauntlet* sounds like Within Temptation, if they were kidnapped by Papa Lazarou. Greatest of all, *Les Invulnéables* is a beautiful, noir-ish ballad with big surges or orchestral pomp. It is, quite literally, *all* going on. And more importantly than that, it is all obnoxiously and infectiously entertaining, and quite unlike anything else you will hear this year. Join the party. Embrace the madness.

FOR FANS OF: Mr. Bungle, Wilderun, Rïcïnn

DOM LAWSON

BUMMER

Dead Horse

THRILL JOCKEY

Kansas City shit-kickers slay The Boss with riffs

Noise rock is always at its most powerful when motivated by sheer contempt for the human race. As with obvious forebears Unsane and Cows, Bummer clearly loathe the world and everything in it and that conviction is ably supported by some of the ugliest and most aggressive riffing in recent memory. *Dead Horse* sounds huge and oppressive, but virulently live and spitting, too; rabid opener *JFK Speedwagon* and the heroically titled *I Want To Punch Bruce Springsteen In The Dick* are metal-heavy but executed with a lurching swamp rock mentality. From the scattershot violence of *Donkey Punch* to the knuckle-dragging boogie of *Quadruple ZZ Top*, the results are righteously obnoxious and stupidly thrilling.

FOR FANS OF: Unsane, Eye Flys, Drive Like Jehu

DOM LAWSON

JERRY CANTRELL

Brighten

SELF-RELEASED

Alice In Chains co-founder gets out his Stetson

Jerry Cantrell's first solo album in nearly 20 years is a supremely enjoyable collection of country-flavoured rock, replete with gleaming hooks, warm guitar tones and the syrupy drizzle of the pedal steel. Tracks like *Siren Song* reveal the guitarist's enduring appreciation for Ennio Morricone but more pointedly, *Brighten* joyfully celebrates the pop and Americana influences of artists like The Byrds, rendered through a prism of 70s hard rock. Unsurprisingly, songs such as *Had To Know* and *Atone* betray Alice In Chains DNA in varying doses, but *Brighten* showcases Jerry doing something both compelling and quite distinct from his day job. A highly addictive collection from an immensely gifted songwriter.

FOR FANS OF: The Eagles, Myles Kennedy, The Temperance Movement

JOE DALY

DEATH BLOOMS

Life Is Pain

ADVENTURE CAT

Nu metal-infused bangers from the banks of the Mersey

Death Blooms aren't here to reinvent the wheel. Since 2017, the Liverpudlians have set out their stall over three EPs of no-nonsense, hardcore-infused nu metalcore, and now their debut delivers on those knuckle-crunching promises. Yes, it's derivative, with Korn and Slipknot influences looming over opener *Shut Up* and the frustrated anthemia of *Anger*, but the melodic choruses that emerge from *In Your Head* and *Caught In A Web* show the duo know their way around a hook. *Life Is Pain* isn't twisting the tried and tested nu metal template and into any new shapes, but it will get the pits started, the heart pumping and middle fingers flying.

FOR FANS OF: Blood Youth, Slipknot, Mudvayne

DANNII LEIVERS

ALEXANDER CRISPIN/PRESS

FLORENCE BLACK
Weight Of The World
SELF-RELEASED

Welsh hard rockers keep the infectious riffs flowing

Florence Black have gathered a lot of momentum ahead of their debut album – three well-received EPs, a clutch of strong festival performances and a barnstorming cover of Budgie's *Breadfan* – and *Weight Of The World* is the natural step up for the Merthyr Tydfil hard rock trio. An avalanche of stomping riffs and infectious choruses tumble out of the 10 tracks, as on the groovy *Inside Out* and recent single, *Sun & Moon*, but Florence Black show their range with the more sedate and ballad-like *Grove Street*. At 36 minutes long, *Weight...* hits that sweet spot for an album in that it doesn't outstay its welcome yet leaves you wanting more. There's plenty of sparkle and potential here – we could be hearing Florence Black's name for a while to come.

FOR FANS OF: Shinedown, Those Damn Crows, Alter Bridge

ELLIOT LEAVER

GUS G
Quantum Leap
AFM

Greek axe hero follows his heart with grim instrumental set

From recording and touring as a hired gun alongside Ozzy to spells with Arch Enemy, Dream Evil, Nightrage and more, also leading his own band Firewind, Gus G has carved out a storied career. Now, for reasons best known to himself, and following three solo albums backed by a variety of singers, the Greek guitarist has dropped any pretence of pursuing radio airplay with an album executed as an instrumental power-trio. It goes without saying that Gus's playing is utterly exemplary, and some of its key melodies – *Into The Unknown*, *Chronesthesia* and *Force Majeure*, which features UFO's Vinnie Moore on second guitar – remain hummable minus the hookline of a lead voice. But after a while of sitting and attempting to pick them out, *Quantum Leap* starts to feel like an endurance test.

FOR FANS OF: Joe Satriani, John Petrucci, Paul Gilbert

DAVE LING

GEMINI SYNDROME
3rd Degree - The Raising
CENTURY MEDIA

LA modern metallers get reborn – back into the 90s

Gemini Syndome's latest album is the closing chapter of a trilogy that completes a journey through birth, life, death, and rebirth. Even with Coal Chamber's Meegs Rascón now on guitar, the alt-metallers still favour a predominantly radio-friendly sound with clean production courtesy of Matt Good (Asking Alexandria, Hollywood Undead), and nu metal, atmospheric, and electronic influences sprinkled throughout. However, *3rd Degree* does brave heavier territory at times and it suits them well. As such, ballads *Best Of Me* and *Hold The Line*, while emotional and well-delivered, feel a tad generic and miss the bite found in more interesting tracks like *Absolution*. Meanwhile, *Abandoned* enjoys fun riffs and sweet touches of Tool and Korn, *Children Of The Sun* is particularly emotive thanks to Aaron Nordstrom's vocals, and *Broken Reflection* is euphoric and deeply sticky.

FOR FANS OF: Saliva, Five Finger Death Punch, Breaking Benjamin

NIK YOUNG

GHOST BATH
Self Loather
NUCLEAR BLAST

North Dakota's far-sighted black metallers seek out new territory

Ghost Bath made a name for themselves with their histrionic approach to black metal on 2015's *Moonlover* and 2017 follow-up *Starmourner*. *Self Loather*, their fourth album, dives headfirst into the far-reaching waters that have defined them since forming in 2012. The screams that permeate *Hide From The Sun* are haunting before the song ends with mellifluous choral harmonies and these journeys from one extreme to the next are navigated with cohesive, narrative ease. Ghost Bath don't stick to bog-standard black metal tropes, expanding and enhancing their songs with groove, clean guitars, melancholy violins and smatterings of regal accoutrements that really pump up the grandeur of such an enterprise. Ghost Bath continue to build upon their compelling take on BM and *Self Loather* is the most accomplished album they've released since their breakthrough with *Moonlover*.

FOR FANS OF: Panopticon, Numenorean, Lantlôs

REMFRY DEDMAN

SMALL MERCIES

Where EP is short for 'Epic Potential'

DEITY'S MUSE
Ennui
MONGREL

Having won 'Best Alternative Band' at the South African Metal Awards last year, Deity's Muse are riding high and this new EP proves that with four expertly crafted prog metal songs full of expanse and raw emotion.

ELLIOT LEAVER

THE HUMAN VEIL
The Hybrid Era
SELF-RELEASED

Keen not to be boxed in, this EP is more modern, less dark and more melodic than previous work, but well-constructed and fierce in its own right, with each track successfully mixing aggression and fragility to a uniquely optimistic end.

NIK YOUNG

LAIR OF THE WHITE WORM
EP1
APF/TREPANATION RECORDINGS

Napalm Death's John Cooke and his Corrupt Moral Altar bandmates relocate themselves to industrial purgatory as six tracks of distorted, soul-damaged clangour wring out an exhausted gasp of hope.

JONATHAN SELZER

ORBIT CULTURE
Shaman
SEEK & STRIKE

Having impressed with 2020's *Nija*, *Shaman* is the sound of a band ready to get back onstage. Giving the anthems and groove of *The Black Album* a modern, techy jolt, songs like *Carvings* and *Strangler* boast massive hooks.

ADAM REES

A.A. WILLIAMS
Arco
BELLA UNION

Multi-instrumentalist A.A. Williams brings her classical training to the fore with a graceful string-led reimagining of her debut EP. The lack of guitars and drums takes nothing away from the songs' brooding power.

TOM O'BOYLE

WITCH FEVER
Reincarnate
MUSIC FOR NATIONS

The debut EP from these Mancunian doom punks delivers six angry, gritty tracks with empowering lyrics and expressive, no-nonsense vocals from the charismatic Amy Walpole. *In The Resurrect* and *Bully Boy* are standouts.

NIK YOUNG

Dream Theater put the 'elation' into 'elevation'

DREAM THEATER

A View From The Top Of The World

INSIDE OUT MUSIC

The kings of progressive metal keep it (relatively) simple

IT'S FAINTLY RIDICULOUS to recall that when Mike Portnoy quit Dream Theater in 2010, some predicted evaporating fortunes for the drummer, writer and producer and the band he had co-founded a quarter century earlier. However, both sides have prospered, Portnoy playing with a wide variety of groups and Dream Theater further enhancing their reputation as the most important progressive metal band on the planet – even picking up a couple of Grammys.

This, the fifth album to feature Mike Mangini, is probably the best record Dream Theater have made since the changing of the guard. Mangini is one of a mere handful of percussionists equipped for the job. The former Extreme man rattles teeth and assaults eardrums from the jarring opening bars of track one, *The Alien*, performing with laser-guided intensity and a boundless sense of rhythm. His contribution to the album is a rhythmic masterclass.

The most priceless attribute of Dream Theater is that, for all the complexity of their compositions, they make everything sound so goddamned easy. John Petrucci's guitar work is lavish and colourful and, for the most part, easy on the ear, while despite the Marmite status among certain fans, James LaBrie injects melody and passion to the likes of *Transcending Time*. Meanwhile, keyboard maestro Jordan Rudess envelops the entire package within swathes of intoxicating texture.

While Dream Theater have previously tested the limits of their fans' patience (see 2016's über-challenging conceptual double-set, *The Astonishing*, relating the unlikely tale of "a retro-futurist post-apocalyptic dystopia ruled by medieval style feudalism"), just like 2019's *Distance Over Time*, *A View From The Top Of The World* is simply the sound of the band reclaiming what it does best, Petrucci's warm and fulsome production sharpened by a gleeful mix from Andy Sneap. The album's title could have not been more appropriate.

FOR FANS OF: **Fates Warning, Rush, Symphony X**

DAVE LING

GHOSTHEART NEBULA

Ascension

BLACK LION

Immersive melancholia from cosmic-minded Milanese crew

Incorporating post-rock influences into your sound can result in effective new perspectives on what metal can be. The problem arises when these initiatives begin to eclipse the heaviness and drain power from the core. No such problem for Milan's Ghostheart Nebula, whose vapour-trail melodies and moments of reflective quietude only enhance the impact of their riffage. *Ascension* demonstrates the band's firm grasp of ponderous dynamics, moving from song to song with a seamlessness that makes full immersion the most rewarding approach. Special mention goes to the wounded roar of vocalist Maurizio Caverzan, which does much to hold the album together, and the effective use of theremin on *The Cage*.

FOR FANS OF: **Ulver, Negură Bunget, Uada**

JOE DALY

GREEN LUNG

Black Harvest

SVART

London's stoner/doom crew observe more than the Sabbath

By virtue of their interest in all things Hammer Horror, ritualistically pagan and leafy green, these Londoners automatically get lumped in with the stoner/doom set. On their second full-length the quintet pull the wool over the ears of anyone expecting further salutation to the basics of Black Sabbath's legacy. Things ain't so doomy and gloomy; *The Harrowing* and *Old Gods* incorporate the neon-hued 80s, whereas the squealing moan of John Wright's organ on *Graveyard Sun* imagines Type O Negative playing Woodstock Festival, and *You Bear The Mark* just out-and-out (classic) *rawks*. Sure, blatant Iommi worship still exists, but so does a healthy regard for classic hair metal, sullen goth, soundtrack soundscapes and Thin Lizzy-style harmonisation.

FOR FANS OF: **Esoteric, Cult Of Luna, My Dying Bride**

JOSEPH STANNARD

GRÀB

Zeitlang

TROLLMUSIC

Reflective black metallers retreat to the Bavarian heartlands

Formed by former Dark Fortress frontman Gràint, Gràb form a crucible within which ancient Bavarian folklore and grandiose voyaging take shape in the bellicose stylings of black metal. Their debut full-length is a concept album about an old man who retreats to a cottage deep in the mountains to reflect on his life and impending death. Steeped in grizzled fury, the title track and *Weizvåda* unleash torrents of dark and refined melodies while at the other end of the spectrum, *Auf Da Roas* unfurls with the ethereal splendour of a dulcimer. A strong and engaging debut.

FOR FANS OF: **Hooded Menace, Hammers Of Misfortune, Pallbearer**

CONNIE GORDON

RAYON RICHARDS

HATE
Rugia
METAL BLADE

Poland's blackened death metal veterans hold their ground

Accused of trading their early Vader and Morbid Angel influences for Behemoth, Hate have seemingly been condemned to the frontier separating the second league from the big boys. But what their only steady member, guitarist/vocalist Adam The First Sinner, lacks in personality he makes up in determination, *Rugia* being Hate's 12th album. It may be peppered with various subtle electronic beeps and loops, but as soon as the pompous intro is over, the recently reconfigured band set out to crush everything in their path. They rarely let go either, even swallowing the various symphonic elements and dissonant arpeggios in their furious wake. *Rugia* could have been a mess, but it's got that typical Polish drive and massive production, and while their patronage remains conspicuous, the fierce efficiency of this compact, 36-minute blitzkrieg can't be denied.

FOR FANS OF: Behemoth, Vader, Dimmu Borgir

OLIVIER BADIN

HELHEIM
WoduridaR
DARK ESSENCE

Bergen's Viking metal pathfinders recalibrate their compass

Three decades in, these Viking metal pioneers continue to break new ground with their 11th album. Once again refusing to make the same record twice, the Norwegians have left behind the more morose and slow-burning vibe of 2019's *Rignir* to embrace a harsher, faster, more extreme sound in a bid to challenge both themselves and their fans. While *WoduridaR* does tip a cap to *Ringnir* when it comes to clean vocals and chilling hooks, this is a different monster altogether that sees the four-piece stitch together different styles from their history to create something fresh and exciting. Highlights include the caustic but catchy *Forrang For Fiender* and *Ni S Soli Sot*, which boasts scabrous riffs, unhinged howls, a jazz-informed guitar solo and a trippy Pink Floyd-esque mid-section.

FOR FANS OF: Vulture Industries, Ulver, Enslaved

EDWIN McFEE

HIGH DESERT QUEEN
Secrets Of The Black Moon
RIPPLE MUSIC

Austin desert-dwelling pilgrims cast their gaze across the heavens

Like all truly great stoner releases, *Secrets Of The Black Moon* is the soundtrack to an inter-dimensional dive through the cosmos. High Desert Queen make use of a full stoner smorgasbord for their debut album, with tones ranging from fuzz and sludge to the cosmic drift of psychedelia and abyss-gazing doom, and yet none of it feels tired or rehashed. By deftly navigating stylistic flourishes, each song feels fresh and adds a new dynamic to the journey. The Sabbathian-stomp of *Heads Will Roll* turns to cascading blows on *The Mountain Vs The Quake*, later opening out to the heavens on *Did She* and *Skyscraper*, right out to the Melvins-like sludge-doom of *Bury The Queen*. Ryan Garney's candied vocal hooks sit at the heart of it all, evoking a radio quality somewhere between Josh Homme and Simon Neal.

FOR FANS OF: Queens Of The Stone Age, Phoxjaw, Mountain Caller

RICH HOBSON

ILLUDIUM
Ash Of The Womb
PROPHECY PRODUCTIONS

California's atmospheric adventurers arise from the flames

Indie rock vibes permeate the harmonic profundities of Illudium's second album. Its soundscape departs the occult-tinged environs of 2016's *Septem* for warmer, wistful climes. An evolution of singer/songwriter Shantel Amundson's songcraft, *Ash Of The Womb* was inspired by the fires that swept her home state of California in 2020. No song is less than six minutes long. Opener *Aster* is a benchmark-setting showcase of the record's punch, with a depth of light and shade that offsets the nuanced vocal primacy, while recording drummer Gregory Wesenfeld's percussive force and intricacy are key factors. Lead single *Soma Sema* has a huge riff that complements Amundson's compellingly moody presence. *Ash Of The Womb* feels deeply personal – a search for hope amidst tragedy that showcases the potential of its creator.

FOR FANS OF: Lantlôs, The Smashing Pumpkins, Emma Ruth Rundle

TOM O'BOYLE

Every Time I Die hit another home run

EVERY TIME I DIE
Radical
EPITAPH

Buffalo's metalcore kings raise another rallying cry

IF POSITIONS ON festival bills were given based on a band's consistency, Every Time I Die would have headlined Download moons ago. The Buffalo outfit are as fiercely beloved in 2021 as they have been across their 23-year career, and part of that is due to the fact they're yet to release a duff album. They're looking at making it nine out of nine with *Radical*, their first in five years and thus representing the longest gap between studio albums to date.

At 51 minutes and 16 tracks, *Radical* is also the lengthiest ETID album yet, but they haven't swerved in a more progressive direction; it feels more that, after half a decade away, the band are merely giving their devoted fanbase more bang for their buck. The first 10 tracks rattle past in less than half an hour, with the punchy *Planet Shit* and colossal riffs in *Desperate Pleasures* making them the standouts, the latter helped by Keith Buckley's shouted refrain of *'You've got an atheist praying for Judgement Day.'*

Talking of refrains, the one-liners that are dotted about will, much like on previous efforts, inspire mass singalongs at live shows. *'Fear is a fetish and I am a masochist'* screams Keith on *The Whip* – a line that is a mosh call just waiting to happen at live shows and incite chaos across a room. Even when they bring the tempo down slightly, like on *White Void*, it's less about throwing shapes than fists and returning the lyrics back with interest.

Nearly a quarter of a century down the line and ETID are still throwing out punk anthems like they're a cinch to create; it's almost unfair on everyone else. Nine albums out of nine? There was never any doubt.

FOR FANS OF: Letlive, Stray From The Path, Knocked Loose

ELLIOT LEAVER

MICHAEL WATSON

Ice Inch Kills: sharp debased men

ICE NINE KILLS

The Silver Scream 2: Welcome To Horrorwood

FEARLESS

Boston's horror aficionados return with an even bloodier sequel

ONE CONCEPT ALBUM dedicated to iconic horror movies would never be enough for Ice Nine Kills. Debut *The Silver Scream*'s second edition, *Welcome To Horrorwood*, has arrived to tackle more spine-chillers, introduced as a collection of songs that implicate vocalist Spencer Charnas in a fictional murder case. With the scene set, each piece pays homage to classic horrors old and new using graphic soundbites, as well as obvious and subtle lyrical references for fans to pick up on.

On the menacing *Child's Play* salute, *Assault & Batteries*, the haunting highlight of *The Shower Scene* (*Psycho*, obvs), *Funeral Derangements*' tremendous breakdown and *Rainy Day*'s *Resident Evil* singalong, INK combine addictive melodies with sinister storytelling to conjure songs that will stick with you. These are no short-lived novelty nods to the movies that make you cover your eyes but you still watch through your fingers – *Welcome To Horrorwood* is a sincere tribute to legendary horrors.

There's no escaping the irony of analysing a record that sarcastically reviews itself on *American Psycho*-derived blockbuster, *Hip To Be Scared*, but this comedic meta-moment provides much-needed light relief before the heaviest instalment. *Take Your Pick* drags back the disturbing vibes with a guest spot from George 'Corpsegrinder' Fisher, the Cannibal Corpse frontman screaming *'Roses are red and violets are blue, they'll need your dental records to identify you!'*

Whether it's *Hellraiser* ode *The Box*'s demonic riff, the anthemic *F.L.Y.* and the unmistakable Rammstein echoes on the *Hostel*-inspired *Wurst Vacation*, every immersive chapter makes its cinematic inspirations clear. Perfectly capturing the vast soundscapes, emotions and fake blood flowing through each movie stamped with their own metalcore trademark, INK have crafted a flawless effort so deeply invested in its subject matter that it demands replay after replay… if you dare.

FOR FANS OF: Motionless In White, Crown The Empire, Asking Alexandria

ALI COOPER

LIGHT OF THE MORNING STAR

Charnel Noir

DEBEMUR MORTI

London's gothic metallers fall from grace

After Ghost broke, the likes of Tribulation, Grave Pleasures and Unto Others started dragging goth rock back into the sunshine. That renewed interest in all things spooky should give Light Of The Morning Star ample chance to get a tan. Not the case, unfortunately. Aside from the title track's percussion slamming like a coffin lid on your plans for 2020, there's little to grapple onto. Atmosphere is vaguely conjured with twinkling keys and sustained chords, whereas choruses like *Our Night Hours* are toe-tapping but fleeting. *Charnel Noir*'s flaw is its lack of commitment: too delicate for mass appeal, too basic for late-night, introspective listens. Not a full-on car crash, but surprisingly flat given the musical toolkit.

FOR FANS OF: Tiamat, Secrets Of The Moon, Grave Pleasures

ALEC CHILLINGWORTH

LIVLØS

And Then There Were None

NAPALM

Danish melodic death metallers show signs of life

From the first seconds of the opening title track, Livløs's second full-length makes it clear that the Danish death metallers aren't about to take any prisoners. Even the acoustic-led interlude, *Kistefjael*, has an underlying sinister tone. Unfortunately, the album doesn't quite have the impact to make Livløs a household name just yet, but songs such as *Pallbearer* and *Drenched In Turmoil* prove there's definite talent. Furthermore, in vocalist Niklas Lykke they have a real star; he's excellent throughout, but especially on the bruising *Seize The Night*. Livløs aren't yet the finished article, but they're heading that way.

FOR FANS OF: At The Gates, The Black Dahlia Murder, Carcass

ELLIOT LEAVER

MALIGNAMENT

Hypocrisis Absolution

PRIMITIVE REACTION

Finnish black metal debutants offer up a dynamic crash course

Finland's Malignament arrive with a battering ram of a debut that, while remaining safely within modern black metal's perimeters, delivers more than its fair share of thrills. From the chaotic rage of *Thunder Of Awakening* to the coarse melodic invocations of *Bloodlust And Immortality*, the album commits to a vision of unwavering brutality. *Like Rats They Followed* delivers a shellacking of blastbeats and razorwire riffage, while *And The Empires Will Fall* rips with chilly malevolence. Aural violence for its own sake is an over-worn trope that the band wisely avoid. Instead, the hyper-aggressive Finns pack each fist-pumping track with enough captivating melodies and kinetic tempo changes to build a real sense of urgency.

FOR FANS OF: Watain, Imha Tarikat, Khandra

JOE DALY

WORLD SERVICE

Heavy metal uprisings from around the globe

APRIL 21ST

Courage Is Born From Fear

ECLIPSE

This Brazilian EP is packed with weighty grooves, big choruses, spiralling riffs and untamed solos. Named after a native celebration of revolution, this razor-sharp metalcore seethes with heart.

DANNII LEIVERS

KRYPTOS

Force Of Danger

AFM

Bangalore's old-school veterans' sixth album means more speed metal anthems, the stench of beer-stained denim and a sense that the 90s should never have happened. *Dawnbreakers* is a gem.

DOM LAWSON

MULLA

Genie

SUBSOUND

These anonymous Iraqis' debut splits 35 minutes of, by turns, mesmeric and maddening lo-fi black metal across two tracks. Adeptly combining Eastern and Western influences, it's a primal scream of dissent.

TOM O'BOYLE

PRESS

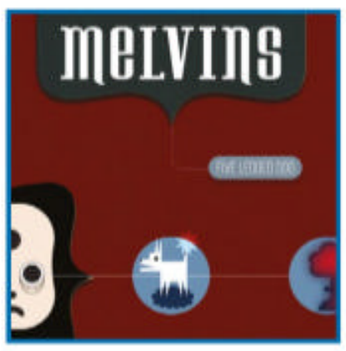
MASSACRE
Resurgence
NUCLEAR BLAST

Deathly Hawaiian legend returns to grind more corpses

With vocalist Kam Lee now back in control of the Massacre name, *Resurgence* offers a subtly different take on the band's classic sound from 2014's *Back From Beyond*, none of whose contributors feature here. With riffs provided by Swedish experts like Wombbath's Jonny Pettersson and the ever-prolific Rogga Johansson, the Hawaiian growler has opted for a proudly old-school approach. There's grubby but incisive production to match the songs that could easily have been written in 1991. The lyrics plumb the depths of Lovecraftian dismay, with Lee as snarling, unhinged narrator, amid the pitch-perfect evocation of arcane, deathly atmospheres. From epic opener *Eldritch Prophecy* to the (possibly inevitable) self-referential assault of *Return Of The Corpse Grinder*, this is nuts-out DM at its hideous best.

FOR FANS OF: Benediction, Obituary, Cancer

DOM LAWSON



MELVINS
Five Legged Dog
IPECAC

Washington's seminal contrarians find another stick to beat us with

The wider world's day-late-dollar-short Melvins appreciation has been odd to witness, and it often seems like the band themselves don't quite know what to make of it. Their lapses into turgid banality and conservative edgelordery could be either the product of piggish, past-their-prime boomers grunting out froth to Fox News or contrarian chancers laughing at how much bullshit people will swallow. Releasing a 36-track acoustic retrospective, then, is entirely on-brand. As a concept it's OTT in a tired sort of way, but there's also no denying that the career-spanning riffs, melodies and softly swished drums generally hold up under scrutiny. It is, of course, also punishingly long and ultimately unnecessary: a novelty item that's either a dialled-in goad or a welcome reimagining, depending on how deep your fandom runs.

FOR FANS OF: Alice In Chains, Tad, Big Business

ALEX DELLER

MERCURY CIRCLE
Killing Moons
NOBLE DEMON

Finnish metal allstars dial up the gloom and the gloss on their debut

As a veritable Finnish supergroup – frontman Jaani Peuhu lends keys and vocals to Swallow The Sun, guitarist Juppe Sutela plays with goth rockers To/Die/For, drummer Jaska Raatikainen was a founder member of Children Of Bodom – the boldness and confidence behind Mercury Circle's debut LP has some profound foundations. The predominating gloom that radiates from each member's oeuvre has elegantly coalesced, finding new forms and directions. Mixing melancholic metal with urban electronica isn't a new idea; it was almost hip around the millennium, when goth-doom was being spliced with ambient chillout and Theatre Of Tragedy were introducing bleeps and loops. *Killing Moons* is perhaps the most tasteful and sumptuous inter-mingling of these strands, but with a heartening focus on darkly rocking band interplay and sophisticated, emotional songwriting.

FOR FANS OF: Later Katatonia, later Anathema, later Ulver

CHRIS CHANTLER

MIRRORS
The Ego's Weight
RISE

Australia's rising alt-metallers turn up the tension dial

The latest addition to Australia's metal scene, Mirrors have shared stages with Alpha Wolf while their ambient textures and pummelling grooves bear the lofty hallmarks of Polaris and Northlane. Harnessing the promise of their 2017 *Fool's Paradise* EP, every note of *The Ego's Weight* screams with bloody-minded ambition. Opener *Hypnagogia* quickly gives way to *Beneath The Sand*; lurching between brooding intensity and unrestrained spite, it's an exercise in perfectly balanced brutality and melodic restraint that raises hairs as well as pulses. There are several flashes of *All Our Gods...*-era Architects in the shimmering electronic flourishes that litter the anthemic *Leave Them Behind* and on the gloriously crafted *Hereditary*, where Patty Goodman's raw-throated delivery bursts into a commanding chorus. A reassuringly strong collection that marks Mirrors as ones to watch.

FOR FANS OF: Northlane, Polaris, Architects

SOPHIE MAUGHAN

Lucifer offer more odes to the Faithful

LUCIFER
Lucifer IV
CENTURY MEDIA

Occult-infused international rockers place their souls back on the scales

JOHANNA SADONIS HAS masterminded Lucifer from concept to quintet over seven years. She's been the only mainstay across four albums, tenaciously building and repairing line-ups while crafting creepy fun-time melodies and penning pitch-perfect morbid odes (*Wild Hearses* reads like a love letter from Morticia Addams to Gomez). She's undeniably a commanding frontwoman, and if her range limitations slightly restrain the full potential of some finely wrought tunes, her melodies are frequently captivating. Atmospherically, hers is a versatile voice, shifting from ceremonial enchantment to glam rock strut, sultry chanteuse to gritty belter, with equal commitment and conviction.

Lucifer IV is straightaway their heaviest record since Cathedral guitarist Gaz Jennings was deep-mining the riffs on *Lucifer I* in 2015. The lighter pop snap of *Lucifer II* and *III* has been cast aside on juddering rollercoaster opener *Archangel Of Death*. *Wild Hearses* opens with a riff that's as reminiscent of classic Cathedral as anything Lucifer did with Gaz; likewise, mellow pastoral instrumental *The Funeral Pyre* is a pitch-perfect homage to the 70s acid folkies Gaz was notorious for name-checking on Cathedral sleeves. This leads into the gloomily swaggering *Cold As A Tombstone*, a graveyard groove adorned with sweet bouquets of twin guitar delight, where we detect a trace of the orgiastic rock'n'roll of guitarist Nicke Andersson's other band, The Hellacopters.

Killer songs keep on coming; *Crucifix (I Burn For You)* begins with a piercing riff reminiscent of Slayer when they played keg parties, building to a chorus that's a dead cert for 1981 US FM radio hit status, with inevitable shades of Blue Öyster Cult. *Bring Me His Head* is pure NWOBHM at its most melodic and upbeat. Bringing together everything they're good at with a loose, warm low-end, *IV* might be Lucifer's choicest numeral yet.

FOR FANS OF: Black Sabbath, Heart, Ghost

CHRIS CHANTLER

ESTER SEGARRA/PRESS

Møl coral all their powers on their new album

MØL
Diorama
NUCLEAR BLAST

Denmark's blackgaze upstarts set an entirely new bar

BLACKGAZE GOT A serious boot up the arse when Møl's debut album, *Jord*, arrived in 2018. At the time, the MO of its biggest stars – namely, Alcest and Deafheaven – was beautifying black metal by extending it with ambient segues. Then these Danes cut the bullshit. Instead of keeping the shoegaze bliss and metallic rage separate, Jord layered the two together. Clean guitars echoed while the rhythm section raged and front-man Kim Song Sternkopf ceaselessly screeched. As a result, it was a more ferocious jolt than anything the genre's idols had presented.

Diorama makes its subversive predecessor look primitive. It lives by the same principles, but every detail has been exaggerated to weave a masterpiece. While still anchored in black metal's brutal vigour, it dares to shimmer even brighter than before. The guitars of Nicolai Hansen and Frederik Lippert, have fully flourished from playing a handful of delicate notes to complete, blissful melodies. Chugging and roars consume the latter half of *Serf* until – with drums still pounding hard – a soft, hummable lead unfolds. Yet, during *Tvesind*, the pair rampage from thrashing chords to a scraped death metal riff worthy of Gojira. Surprises abound, and yet nothing ever sounds shoehorned in.

Sternkopf is similarly unchained as he introduces clean vocals to his repertoire. Their sudden emergence during *Itinerari*'s chorus creates an instant anthem, destined to incite singalongs live. They return on the closing title track: an operatic duet that plummets into a hellscape of screams and feedback, ending *Diorama* at an evolutionary peak.

Flaunting all of blackgaze's strengths at once while also connoting ambitions beyond the genre's borders, *Diorama* deserves to catapult Møl into the stratosphere. In much the same way Deafheaven's *Sunbather* set the standard for the last decade, this should be the measuring stick for the 2020s.

FOR FANS OF: An Autumn For Crippled Children, Woods Of Desolation, Deafheaven

MATT MILLS

MISANTHUR
Ephemeris
SEASON OF MIST

Experimental black metallers put on the brakes before the brink

Dismal beauty characterises *Enter The Void*, the opening track of this Polish BM/experimental duo's debut. It's a disarming intro as drones take left turns into lounge jazz. Hellscythe's vocals are resonant and hypnotically alluring one moment, fervently caustic the next. During *Essence* the programmed drums offer a strangely ethereal divergence over a keening tremolo lead. While *Black Clouds & No Silver Linings* and *The Serpent Crawls* offer sustained intensity and atmospheric fluctuations, the experimentalism then drops off somewhat, making for an initially engaging experience that later requires perseverance.

FOR FANS OF: Imperium Dekadenz, The Ruins Of Beverast, Blut Aus Nord

TOM O'BOYLE

THE OMNIFIC
Escapades
WILD THING

Twin-bass adventures from the Australian djentlands

Aggravated vocals, boisterous riffs and frenzied solos may be the backbone of metal, but what if this spinal column was removed? Lacking a vocalist to harness LP with any 'standard' musical structures, progressive Aussies The Omnific house two five-string bassists – and no guitars. While the outright exclusion of heavily distorted guitar riffs bears some impact on the potential 'weightiness' of the trio's music, the low-slung, djenty, groove-affected performances from Matthew Fackrell and Toby Peterson-Stewart dart effortlessly through an impressive display of fun and frenetic musicianship. Intelligent, exploratory melodies of rich, rhythmic diversity merge with colourful, ever-shifting atmosphere, hinting toward a bright future for the instrumental outfit.

FOR FANS OF: Plini, The Hellix Nebula, Their Dogs Were Astronauts

LUKE MILNE

ORDER
The Gospel
SEASON OF MIST

Oslo underground metal veterans continue their march into Hell

Few bands have nailed the spirit and atmosphere of the late-80s metal underground better than Order. The Norwegians' 2017 debut, *Lex Amenitae*, was a treacly eruption of blistered blackness, with a proud debt to Celtic Frost and Autopsy and more rancid riffs than seemed strictly fair. Somehow, *The Gospel* is even more vile and destructive. Horribly dark and yet powered by a snotty, rock'n'roll spirit, songs like *It Burns* and *Descend* feel edgy and hostile in a way that more mannered and self-conscious black metal seldom does. When the tempo drops to a debilitating thud on the likes of *Lust* and *Tomb*, the creeping feeling that a giant, slavering maw is baring its teeth somewhere nearby is unavoidable.

FOR FANS OF: Celtic Frost, Mayhem, Cadaver

DOM LAWSON

CORNELIUS QVIST/HEARTMATTER ARTWORKS

PHANTOM FIRE
The Bust Of Beelzebub
EDGED CIRCLE

Bergen's former Krakow members set fire to their post-metal past

Clearly keen not to waste any time during this uncertain era of lockdowns and live music bans, Phantom Fire first burst onto the scene with all guns blazing in last May. Featuring members of Gaahls Wyrd and Krakow, this new band of old souls are still finding their feet on their magnificently monikered subgenre-straddling debut album, but they manage to kick some ass along the way too. Following hot on the heels of their well-received EP, *Return Of The Goat*, the Bergen-based two-piece's debut album is lean in length but pleasingly weighty in the riff department. They're at their best when they take a walk on the weird side, *Feed On Fire* proving a fun fusion of black metal and psych that suggests a bright future for the duo.

FOR FANS OF: Gaahls Wyrd, Krakow, Sarke

EDWIN MCFEE

REAPING ASMODEIA
Darkened Infinity
PROSTHETIC

Tech deathcore merchants swap bludgeoning for bluster

Dispensing with some of the deathcore elements of previous effort *Impuritize* in favour of increased speed and volume of notes, this Minnesota trio's third effort is the band's most noteworthy. There's still plenty of bottom-end and djenty bounce to be found in opener *Epoch Of Choler* and *Simulacra*, but it's the fretboard gymnastics of Alexander Kelly and drummer Daniel Koppy running laps around his kit that make closer *The Consequence Of Being* impossible to ignore. With so many musically dazzling bands jockeying for attention, Reaping Asmodeia have to display more than just technical proficiency. Encouragingly, the songwriting here is also a step up, complete with moments that embed themselves in your cranium. *Switching Shadows* and *Oneironautic Oblivion* maintain a menacing atmosphere, *The Forge Of Moira* builds to a determined finish while *Dreamcaster*'s melodic bombast hits previously uncharted peaks.

FOR FANS OF: Revocation, Beneath The Massacre, Aversions Crown

ADAM REES

SENTINELS
Collapse By Design
SHARPTONE

East coast metallic hardcore five-piece strike hard and fast

Collapse By Design is inevitably what happens to building pressures that cannot be contained any longer. Since 2013, New Jersey metallic hardcore unit Sentinels have been toiling away, conjuring polyrhythmic riffs that have only gotten bigger, heavier and downright filthy, culminating in a juggernaut of seething brutality unleashed on this killer debut. From the start, it sounds like a band who have truly honed in on their style, filtering out the bullshit to leave them with more substance than just a collection of mindless, white-knuckle beatdowns. There's little in terms of melodic relief here, yet Sentinels atmospherically balance things out nicely, allowing enough breathing room to really let you feel the sheer impact of what this band do best: bring the pain.

FOR FANS OF: Darknet, Petroglyphs, Ghost Iris

HYWEL DAVIES

SHE SAID DESTROY
Succession
MAS-KINA RECORDINGS

Norwegian noisemongers return to keep tabs on their chaos

Stylistically, She Said Destroy can hardly sit still on the best of days. So imagine the trepidation waiting in the wings of coherence with the news *Succession* was written over the course of 13 years. Encouragingly, the band have deferred to the side of controlled as opposed to unadulterated chaos with the discordant doom grunge of *Eyes Go Pale* and the angelically epic, black metal-infused *Sharpening The Blade* pulling 90° turns from the crusty d-beat thrash of *You Will End*. On the other hand, *Collapse* and *Greed Witches* temper thudding heaviness with distinctive melodics similar to local legends Extol. It's difficult to say whether She Said Destory are discovering a sound or direction, as each song exhibits its own multiplicity basted together by a distinctive guitar crawl and frontman Anders Bakke's harsh voice. All place the album firmly into 'grower, not shower' category.

FOR FANS OF: Sculptured, Ephel Duath, Tribulation

CONNIE GORDON

Tom Morello opens up more eclectic avenues

TOM MORELLO
The Atlas Underground Fire
MOM + POP

Rage Against The Machine axeman brings Oli Sykes and Eddie Vedder into the fray

RAGE AGAINST THE Machine lived to transgress. As they soundtracked 90s counterculture, their coalition of rap and rock tested both genres' boundaries. Their onstage stunts, such as protesting censorship in the nude at Lollapalooza, decimated the lines of political correctness. And their guitarist, Tom Morello, somehow made funk-inspired licks sound perfectly heavy metal.

Two decades after RATM's heyday, Tom still stirs controversy. His solo debut, *The Atlas Underground*, was self-described as "a brand-new alloy of metal, EDM and guitar-shreddery" and conflicted feedback was hurled in return. Depending on who you ask, its darting from genre to genre and cameo to cameo was either visionary or unfocused. Its follow-up splits the difference. This time also flirting with garage rock, folk, electronic and noise, it's a smorgasbord of hits and misses.

Opening instrumental *Harlem Hellfighter* encapsulates the album's best qualities. Buzzing guitars are routinely interrupted by J-pop joviality before it finishes in a cacophony of synths. However, persistently heavy percussion keeps everything anchored, invigorating from start to end. In that vein, Oli Sykes' yells affirm *Let's Get The Party Started* as an aggro anthem, while *Charmed I'm Sure* uses a riff groovy enough for RATM as the nucleus of an EDM stomper. On the flipside, a pedestrian *Highway To Hell* casts two of rock's greatest singers, Eddie Vedder and Bruce Springsteen, as little better than frontmen for a pub cover band. Chris Stapleton leads *The War Inside* through nauseatingly schmaltzy country, then *Naraka* plateaus in repetitive r'n'b beats. *On The Shore Of Eternity* proves a sadly similar finale, plodding monotonously for eight minutes.

Tom Morello could easily shit out bottom-tier funk rock songs and call it a solo album. That he's taken a dozen risks is magnificent, but no gambler wins every time.

FOR FANS OF: Bring Me The Horizon, Royal Blood, Audioslave

MATT MILLS

TRAVIS SHINN/PRESS

Whitechapel display their community chest

WHITECHAPEL
Kin
METAL BLADE

Knoxville's deathcore deviants ramp up their ascent

WHILE PEOPLE BEMOAN the generic nature of deathcore, Whitechapel have become an exception to the rule. The Knoxville sextet are now eight albums into a 15-year career and have continually chipped away at the parameters of the genre to the point where 2019's *The Valley* was barely recognisable as deathcore at all. Instead, melody, ethereal soundscapes and grungier guitar tones were all tied together by a cohesive conceptual narrative. No one's saying they're David Bowie here but, considering the dogmatic and regimented nature of the scene they came from, Whitechapel show 10 times more ambition than any other band from that world.

Obviously, they were never going to head backwards, and *Kin* is a further evolution of Whitechapel's sound, where acoustic guitars and sombre, soaring vocal hooks intertwine with brutal slabs of molten metal. The album opens with the outlaw country strum of *I Will Find You*, which soon introduces double-kick drums and Phil Bozeman's patented roar. It's an exhilarating start, and proves just how important dynamics are to metal.

Many of Whitechapel's peers seem unable to grasp that the heavy sounds so much heavier if it kicks in behind something delicate and beautiful. For example, the gruesome stomp that arrives on *A Bloodsoaked Symphony* sounds even more destructive thanks to the anticipation the band build before it arrives, and the little breather they take in the middle of *To The Wolves* makes the blasting you've just taken feel unbelievably savage. Toward the end of the album Phil allows his clean vocals to dominate the record; he's been doing it on the last few Whitechapel albums, but not consistently to this extent, and it sounds glorious. Purists may bemoan what has become of them, but that's their loss. *Kin* is another evolutionary step from deathcore's most creative minds.

FOR FANS OF: Suicide Silence, The Acacia Strain, Gojira

STEPHEN HILL

SIGNS OF THE SWARM
Absolvere
UNIQUE LEADER

Pittsburgh deatchore merchants let their stores go stale

The fourth album from these Pittsburgh death metallers was tainted a month before its release with the news that guitarist Corey Smarsh had been fired due to allegations of abuse. *Absolvere* does have some shining moments: the bludgeoning assault of *Nameless* and the sludge-laden crush of *Revelations Ov A Silent* King. However, the album seems perfectly comfortably remaining in third gear and not pushing the boat out further. The most telling aspect about *Absolvere* is that, despite featuring Alex Erian from Despised Icon and Shadow Of Intent's Ben Duerr, once this is over you'd rather put those bands on instead.

FOR FANS OF: Thy Art Is Murder, Whitechapel, Brand Of Sacrifice

ELLIOT LEAVER

THE SILVER
Ward Of Roses
GILEAD MEDIA

Horrendous members spawn new monsters from the DM abyss

No longer content with simply being members of Horrendous, one of modern death metal's most distinctive bands, brothers Matt and Jamie Knox have recruited Crypt Sermon drummer Enrique Sagarnaga and first-time vocalist Nick Duchemin to depart on a bold new musical path, citing fatigue with metal's oft-repeated tropes. *Ward Of Roses* is a complex, multi-layered and dynamic listen: ostensibly a progressive DM album with myriad other influences. Matt debuts soaring clean vocals for the first time on the epic *Fallow*, leaving the harsh vocals to Nick's tortured howls. Despite their ambition, The Silver struggle to offer anything truly original, but still, this is urgent and compelling modern extremity.

FOR FANS OF: Rivers Of Nihil, Intronaut, Morbus Chron

TOM O'BOYLE

SLOW CRUSH
Hush
CHURCH ROAD

Sumptuous shoegaze and seismic rumbles from the Belgian frontiers

Belgium's heavy shoegaze crew Slow Crush are back with the follow-up to 2018's much-respected debut, *Aurora*. *Drown* is a warm hug of a song, all serene swelling guitar lines over Isa Holliday's beautifully understated vocals. The tranquillity is temporary, however, as *Blue* lives up to its name, drowning you in a sea of gloomy synths and bowel-quaking bass that counters the sumptuous guitars and vocals. The juxtapositions work mellifluously throughout *Hush*, offering beautiful sonic textures anchored with weighty heavy authority throughout. A five-track run from *Swivel* to *Thrill* gives the second half of the album room to let these compositions flourish and mutate before our ears. An accomplished follow-up to a promising debut.

FOR FANS OF: Smashing Pumpkins, Slowdive, Deafheaven

REMFRY DEDMAN

ALEX MORGAN/PRESS

TWELVE FOOT NINJA
Vengeance
VOLKANIK

Aussie crew's unchecked creativity has messy consequences

Twelve Foot Ninja intend to carve out a singular niche on their third album. But sadly, the daring approach of throwing every idea at the 10 tracks without any restraint often results in an awkward mess. *Shock To The System* and *Culture War* look like achieving an admirable pop/metal fusion only for daft vaudevillian narratives or salsa trumpets to kick in. Every time *Start The Fire* or *Dead End*'s punch and resolute hooks feel like addressing the balance, the likes of *IDK* rears its head, with its glitchy skips between 8-bit effects, a bullish groove and chart-bothering vocals too wacky to be taken seriously. Ultimately listeners will have to decide whether *Vengeance*'s output is ingenious or irritating.

FOR FANS OF: Bring Me The Horizon Periphery, (Hed)pe

ADAM REES

UNTAMED LAND
Like Creatures Seeking Their Own Forms
NAPALM

Wild west black metallers return for a few hollers more

With its fusion of black metal and Spaghetti Western soundtrack, Untamed Land's 2018 debut, *Between The Winds*, merited attention despite its thrifty-sounding synths. Imagine Summoning trading Tolkien's high fantasy for Sergio Leone's godlessness and gunsmoke. The intervening years have seen mastermind Patrick Kern hone his concept, America's mythological wild frontiers described in atmospheric dustbowl signifiers from portentous bells and mariachi horns to angelic choirs-in-mourning. Howling into the widescreen wilderness like a slain vigilante's vengeful spirit, Patrick corrals his arrangements with acute cinematic vision, conjuring one-horse towns, forsaken graveyards, desert, dirt and heat with evocative martial drums and twangy guitar, before unleashing one of extreme music's finest banjo breakouts during *A Nameless Shape* to forge an unholy gutbucket trinity alongside Spazz's grind classic *Spudboy* and Taake's baffling *Myr*.

FOR FANS OF: Summoning, Wayfarer, Ennio Morricone

SPENCER GRADY

VILDHJARTA
Måsstaden Under Vatten
CENTURY MEDIA

Swedish djent quartet trudge through the shadow of the greats

Noughties djent owed its existence to Meshuggah, with countless guitarists hoping to emulate their heroes' polyrhythmic eight-string smacks. Few lifted more from the masters than Vildhjarta, who also incorporated similarly progressive-yet-thrashing drums and low growls, albeit offset by ambient leads. Ten years on from their debut, their follow-up shows that nothing has changed. Down one singer, one guitarist and a bassist, the soundscape is nowhere near as frenetic. Add in a gargantuan 80-minute runtime and *Måsstaden Under Vatten* becomes an exercise in monotony. Although some riffs, like the grinding melody midway through *Sunset Sunrise Sunset Sunrise*, strike catharsis, they're few and far between. Meshuggah needn't worry about getting usurped any time soon.

FOR FANS OF: Meshuggah, Nug, Periphery

MATT MILLS

WOODEN THRONE
Under The Moon They Wander Until Fading Away
PURITY THROUGH FIRE

October Falls mainman heads into the heart of the forest

From the first chord the listener is swept into the cover painting of exploding constellations above coniferous woodland. Immersion is everything with this sort of mid-paced, stargazey pine-scented BM, blooms of symphonic synth spicing up minimalist, droning guitar chords. On their 32-minute debut, Wooden Throne have a firm grasp on the atmospheric dynamics of this estimable form: the haunted house piano, the dejected guitar melodies, the epic, nature-worshipping expanse. This assuredness of touch is explained by the album's Finnish mastermind, Mikko Lehto, whose work in October Falls has consistently beguiled since the mid-00s. The two bands aren't entirely dissimilar, but Wooden Throne have a more unashamedly nostalgic feel, falling squarely between mid-90s foresty BM and mid-90s poetic doom-death, with the ghost of Bathory's *Hammerheart* era looming imperiously over it.

FOR FANS OF: Bathory, early Ulver, early Katatonia

CHRIS CHANTLER

RESURRECTIONS

Unearthing the latest metal reissues

Motörhead: still immune to the sands of time

OVERKILL'S SIX-ALBUM COLLECTION, *The Atlantic Years 1986-1994*, **[8]** offers a crash course in the band's stylistic adventures. 1987's *Taking Over* feels like the missing link crossover between NWOBHM and thrash – albeit about four years too late. But by *Under The Influence* and the Terry Date-produced *The Years Of Decay*, the band had given themselves to the goofy glory – and groove – of East Coast thrash (inspiring a glam-weary Pantera to seek out Terry and reinvent themselves in the process). *Horrorscope* remains the band's most vibrant and vital (classic) release, its thundering assault crystallising everything brilliant about Overkill. By comparison, *I Hear Black* and *W.F.O.* feel uneven, though Overkill's continued commitment to stylistic experimentation ensures they remain interesting listening, if somewhat inessential.

The 90s threw plenty of heavy metal bands into an identity crisis. Just look at **TROUBLE**. The recently unveiled *One For The Road/Unplugged* (Hammerheart) **[7]** captures their strange transition from doom metal progenitors to an Alice In Chains knockoff. Bizarrely, they make it work – to an extent. A snapshot of the point shortly before vocalist Eric Wagner left and later briefly rejoined, there is an emotional nous to the material that hints towards the band's prodigious legacy. It's still hard to take any 'definitive' collection of **MOTÖRHEAD** songs that doesn't include live renditions seriously, but *Everything Louder Forever* (BMG) **[8]** at least remembers the band carried on after 1986, meaning we don't miss out on choice cuts like *I Ain't No Nice Guy*.

Speaking of overlooked latter-day line-ups, it's good to finally see **SEPULTURA**'s first decade with Derrick Green held up for scrutiny in new boxset *Sepulnation: The Studio Albums 1998-2009* (BMG) **[7]**. The comparatively forgettable *Roorback* aside, the output is remarkably well-rounded. *Against* and *Nation* bring forth a hardcore punk snarl, while *Dante XXI* and *A-Lex* introduced conceptual ambitions that have served the band so well this past decade – plus, *Choke*, *Convicted In Life* and *False* are among the finest Seps cuts you'll find.

RICH HOBSON

PRESS

LIVE REVIEWS

MEGADETH
LAMB OF GOD/TRIVIUM/HATEBREED
FIVEPOINT AMPHITHEATRE, IRVINE, CALIFORNIA

Metal's big guns finally get let loose on the West Coast

EIGHTEEN PSYCHE-BATTERING months have passed since any of us have enjoyed the sublime privilege of standing in front of a wall of amps, bathing in the deafening squall of a metal show. That all changes this evening as the self-proclaimed Metal Tour Of The Year rolls into the FivePoint Amphitheatre. Originally scheduled for 2020, organisers pushed the dates back a year amid COVID-related uncertainty. There's a slight change to the bill, though – due to international visa complications (a situation facing most bands hoping to play in the US this year), original openers In Flames have been replaced by PMA masters Hatebreed.

While nobody in their right mind would say that normalcy has returned to California, the vibes at FivePoint are abundantly festive. The parking lot teems with beer-swilling tailgaters blaring Alice In Chains, Iron Maiden and the like, while inside, blissful metalheads stroll across a large green festival ground, circled by food trucks and micro-breweries. Dozens of punters in black band t-shirts toss beanbags back and forth across the multiple cornhole games set up in the middle of the pitch. Concealed by a mask, Megadeth drummer Dirk Verbeuren walks through the crowd without anybody (save *Hammer*'s intrepid photographer) recognising him. Then, at 6pm, **HATEBREED** hit the stage to a roar of assent from a rapidly filling stadium. The Connecticut hardcore legends channel a year's worth of pent-up aggression into a slamming 30-minute set that includes *Empty Promises*, Slayer cover *Ghosts Of War* and closer *I Will Be Heard*.

It's been more than 15 years since **TRIVIUM** released *Ascendancy* – their sophomore effort and first real hint of the gargantuan potential within their ranks. The ensuing years have seen the Floridian metallers churn out a steady stream of inventive and fiercely affecting albums that synthesise styles as varied as thrash, prog, metalcore and death metal. Tonight they rip straight into new single *In The Court Of The Dragon* and spend the next 40 minutes firing flaming riffs and taut, sledgehammer grooves into the balmy California sky. Taunting the crowd, frontman Matt Heafy says, "The best crowd we've seen is Denver fucking Colorado!" Unsurprisingly, Irvine takes the bait and absolutely erupts, not letting up for the remainder of Trivium's unrelenting, eight-song set, which closes with an utterly pulverising *In Waves*.

Feels so good to be back!

The Metal Tour Of The Year offers **LAMB OF GOD** their first opportunity to play live after the release of their new self-titled album last year. As darkness descends, the silhouette of frontman Randy Blythe appears behind a blue curtain and he begins the haunting intro to *Memento Mori*. The curtain drops, the band kick in and, just like that, we're traveling at mach speed. Powered by a frenzy of neck-snapping tempos and stop-on-a-dime grooving, the band are in top form, whipping through one banger after another, including *Walk With Me In Hell*, *Set To Fail* and *512*. With Lamb Of God's steadily ascending stature comes more elaborate stage production, which means ginormous smoke cannons and flaming pyrotechnics.

"Goddamn, it feels good to be together, don't it, motherfuckers?" bellows Randy after the rhythmic crush of *Resurrection Man*. It certainly does. Guitarists Mark Morton and Willie Adler unleash a fist-pumping onslaught of jagged, staccato riffs and, welded to the sinewy grooving of drummer Art Cruz and bassist John Campbell, the songs take on a rubbery funk that renders standing still an impossibility. The band close their 65-minute set with *Contractor*, *Laid To Rest* and *Redneck*.

As far as latter-day ironmen go, you'd be hard-pressed to find one with Dave Mustaine's bona fides. Over the course of his career, Dave has battled drug addiction, undergone treatment for kidney stones and temporarily lost the use of his left arm due to radial nerve damage. Through sheer force of will, he retaught himself how to play guitar and returned to playing, only to face throat cancer in 2019. All before the sprightly age of 60. Mustaine reports that he is now "100% cancer-free", and tonight he takes the stage to a hero's welcome, opening with a scorching *Hangar 18*. Megadeth sound nothing short of superb, titillating the surging crowd with the likes of *Sweating Bullets*, *She-Wolf* and *Tornado Of Souls*. Tonight we see the newest Megadeth line-up, including the return of bassist James Lomenzo, along with guitarist Kiko Loureiro and drummer Dirk Verbeuren. "There are some people," Dave says, "when they hear that live metal music isn't going to happen, they kind of like that. And I want to kick their ass!" He accomplishes this through a ferocious 11-song campaign, bringing the evening to a close with *Holy Wars... The Punishment Due*.

Time will tell if this tour is a hopeful sign of things to come or the last of its kind for another indeterminate period. Regardless, tonight, both bands and fans savour every minute, and we can't wait to do this again.

JOE DALY

THE SET
MEGADETH
Hangar 18
The Threat Is Real
Sweating Bullets
Trust
Conquer Or Die!
Dystopia
She-Wolf
Tornado Of Souls
Symphony Of Destruction
Peace Sells
Holy Wars... The Punishment Due

STEPHANIE CABRAL

Hatebreed: Jamey Jasta smashes his opening set

Lamb Of God: top hat just out of shot

Trivium: lost in music, and geography

Dave Mustaine: back in business

Rock and awe at the FivePoint Amphitheatre

Danny Estrin sets controls for the heart of the fun

VOYAGER

MAGNET HOUSE, PERTH, AUSTRALIA

Australia's electro-prog mavericks celebrate two decades in spectacular style

IT'S BEEN THE trip of a lifetime for Aussie electro-proggers Voyager, and what better way to celebrate 20 years and seven albums than with a specially curated, fan-picked setlist highlighting both the vibrancy and diversity of their back catalogue?

This second livestream event, beaming worldwide from Perth's empty Magnet House venue, comes complete with a full production, including retina-popping visuals and an abundance of moving overhead LED lights and full smiles from a band whose irresistible humour is as well-honed as their musical chops. They kick off with the thunderous double header of *To The Morning Light* and *The Eleventh Meridian*, taken from debut *Element V*, its power metal theatrics are a far cry from the glittering pop-swathed prog of more recent times. *White Shadow*'s skyscraping falsettos, furious solo trade-offs and blastbeats showcase the band at their most bombastic and despite Danny Estrin's self-deprecating quip of "I can't believe we ever wrote this", these kind of infectious choruses and symphonic licks were designed for the live stage.

Voyager put in a dazzling performance

Moving seamlessly ahead to the 2000s, Voyager illustrate the ease in which they delved into genre-blending experimentation, ever-evolving via a plethora of soulful crescendos (*The Devil In Me*) while dipping a toe into heady darkness with *Iron Dream*. Its lush, synth-drenched pomp dappled with gothic undertones serves as a fitting tribute to the late, great Peter Steele. Tongue-in-cheek video interludes and Danny pouring shots during *V*-era tubthumper *Seasons Of Age* aside, the second half is but a testament to the technicolour of this five-price's discography. From *Hyperventilating*'s shimmering pop hooks and the beautifully sombre keys of the piano-led *Summer Always Comes Again* to *Ghost Mile*'s addictive melodies and set-closer *Runaway*'s rumbling breakdowns and windmill-inducing keytar solos, Voyager's past sits perfectly amongst their present. Here's to the journey – and the next two decades.

SOPHIE MAUGHAN

DARK SKY BURIAL

THE UNDERWORLD, LONDON

Shane Embury's many projects promise varying degrees of visceral intensity in keeping with his work as one of the key creatives behind Napalm Death. Not so with Dark Sky Burial, his new project plundering transgressive industrial soundscapes more in the vein of Throbbing Gristle. Making their live debut, DSB transform the club into a New York attic for an immersive taste of arthouse experimentalism. The second the band lurch to life, a dark mesmerism takes hold. Juddering drumbeats and roiling electronica craft an atmosphere that sits somewhere between a waking dream and unsettling abjection. The effect isn't a million miles from Thom Yorke's soundtrack to 2018's *Suspiria*, offsetting buzzing low-end and bright notation in a way that is captivating but also gets the hackles up. The near-constant wall of sound only reinforces the show's reality-blurring qualities; it's less a set of individual songs than a sensory trip that abruptly ends around the 60-minute mark. If not for Shane's Brummie bark as he recites spoken word verses, you could almost forget you were watching a live band, the show feeling more like shamanistic sonic ritual played out in a not-too-distant dystopian future.

RICH HOBSON

GREEN LUNG

NEUROMATIC

THE EXCHANGE, BRISTOL

Black magic, pagan rituals and naked devil worship should be on the national agenda every Sunday night. Alas, only Bristol gets that privilege tonight as the Exchange is flooded with gig-thirsty fans craving riffs, beer and Satan. The atmosphere that psychedelic rockers **NEUROMATIC** open up to already feels electrified, only to be sent into hyperspace as the five-piece let loose soundscapes that would give Hawkwind a run for their money. **GREEN LUNG** explode onstage in classic Sabbath-esque fashion that's infused with a new, unholy spirit. After two years of waiting for this night, leading man Tom Templar unleashes his eerie Tobias Forge-meets-early Ozzy vocals with a magnetic physical presence. Dropping several new tracks like the blistering *Leaders Of The Blind*, with its face-melting guitar solo and charging grooves, their sound seems to have gained a couple of extra tons over lockdown that, unlike us, it shouldn't feel guilty for. Barely stopping for breath, Green Lung don't let us down for a single second this evening. Evil has arisen once again in the West Country.

HYWEL DAVIES

PRESS

No one bats an eyelid during Dordeduh's set

PROPHECY FEST

BALVE HÖHLE, GERMANY

Primordial and Dordeduh raise the spirits in spectacular surroundings

IF EVER THERE was a livestream that made you want to reach through the screen, this is the one. If you've been lucky enough to visit the Balve cave before, set into lush-foliage-carpeted hills in western Germany, you'll know that its sheer vastness is jaw-dropping in a way that doesn't fully come across when broadcast, no matter how many cut-aways the two day event offers. It's a suitable setting for a festival run by a label committed to broadening the scope of underground music, from far-sighted black metal to intimate yet panoramic neo-folk.

The first metal band of day one, **SUN OF THE SLEEPLESS**, come across a very personal endeavour for mailman Ulf Theodor Schwadorf, if not a particularly visceral experience in black metal terms. Despite the searching riffs and swathes of keys, there's a lot of plod to Ulf's vocals, spelling out his spiritual path rather than using it as a runway. The other cause for leaving claw marks on your screen is the singular event - **DORDEDUH** playing a Negură Bunget set. Having split from Negură after 2006's landmark *Om* album, and with their estranged former bandmate Negru having passed away, this might well be the last time many of tonight's songs will ever be played live. With all but one track taken from *Om*, it's a transformative, bearings-annihilating experience. Frontman Hupogrammos switches between stoic medium and enflamed seer as primal force and radiant, hallowed atmospheres form something that still sounds utterly new and yet ageless. *Pohvala Hulă* digs deep into their feral past, but a closing *Ţesarul De Lumini* is still one of extreme metal's most heart-in-mouth moments, those closing, spent tremolo riffs echoing like background radiation from a supernova. Both the setting and fact that **PRIMORDIAL** are celebrating their 30th anniversary leave frontman Alan Averill uncharacteristically humbled, but not for long. Forgoing song introductions halfway through, they still manage to almost tear even *this* roof off. The surging, churning riffs of *As Rome Burns*, and the closing call-and-reponse epic *Empire Falls*, like Primordial's predecessors, take you to a point of rapt, sensual overload.

Prophecy Fest: the true undergound festival

Day two's **E-L-R** set offers another opportunity to lose your moorings. Bassist I.R. and guitarist S.M. are near-mirror images, weaving apocalyptic deliverance from the most spectral of threads. **DORDEDUH**'s own set weaves a fiercely radiant, incantational majesty, while **DOOL**'s very Dutch blend of classic hard rock and psychedelia as deeply personal, otherworldly odyssey feels more than fitting for their awe-inducing surroundings.

JONATHAN SELZER

INSET: SVEN PAUL/PRESS MAIN: CARSTEN BRAND/PRESS

While She Sleeps: Loz Taylor survives round three

WHILE SHE SLEEPS
LOATHE
KEY CLUB, LEEDS

Sheffield's community-minded metallers get intimate and sweaty

MAN, HAVE WE missed gigs like this. Crammed into a tiny Leeds basement, while sweat drips from the ceiling and the smell of damp Gildan cotton rises in the heat, we await a truly great bill – one of metal's most exciting rising bands alongside one of our finest stalwarts.

Up first, **LOATHE** are on confrontational form. The metallic hardcore assault of opener *Red Room* leaves you breathless, *Gored*'s rumbling bass rearranges your guts and the technical flourishes of *Servant And Master* twist against a nightmarish backdrop of atmospheric electronics. A shimmering Deftones-ian influence seeps through on *Stigmata* and the transcendent *Two-Way Mirror*, and by seething closer *White Hot* the Liverpudlians have justified their 'future of metal' tag and then some.

Loathe take another step towards stardom

These days, it's rare to see **WHILE SHE SLEEPS** in a room this small. This is the final show of a three-night Leeds residency and the room is buzzing with an anticipation (and a "YORKSHIRE! YORKSHIRE!" chant) that explodes as the serrated guitars of opener *Sleeps Society* cut through the tension. "This stage is your stage!" barks vocalist Loz Taylor. "Get up here and dive off!" From that moment, it's bedlam. The pit swirls and a constant deluge of crowdsurfers swamps the front, while slick bodies dangle off the ceiling pipes during an incendiary *Anti-Social* and *Brainwashed*. By the time *You Are We* kicks the chaos up another notch, a beaming Loz has been sucked into the vortex. The evening's biggest thrill, however, comes during the one-two punch encore of fresh material from recent album, *Sleeps Society*. While *Systematic* sets a new bar for just how efficiently this band can pulverise a room, *Nervous* might just be their most anthemic moment to date. It's a change of pace: all clean vocals and breathing space – but is the perfect ode to the band's "it's OK to not be OK" mantra, which the crowd bellow back at them with life-affirming conviction. For a band who are all about people power, this unification of lungs and spirit was well worth the wait.

DANNII LEIVERS

CRYPTIC SHIFT
SAWTICIDE/DAMIM
NAMBUCCA, LONDON

Openers **SAWTICIDE** play a relatively meat'n'potatoes strain of death metal but there's a technical slant to their riffing and an undeniable groove that gets heads bobbing, although the vocals are a little lost in the mix early on. **DAMIM** are more esoteric but no less engaging, showing a wry sense of humour between songs. Their more modern take is progressive and technical with enough room for more accessible moments and blastbeats aplenty. Unfortunately, their set is stunted by a bass-heavy mix that takes away from their impassioned performance. Tonight's undisputed kings of weird are headliners **CRYPTIC SHIFT**, performing their mind-expanding debut, *Visitations From Enceladus*, in full. Opening with *Cosmic Dreams* to whet appetites before launching into 26-minute space odyssey *Moonbelt Immolator*, their cosmic death metal is an experience to behold. They make the most of the small stage; it might not allow for much movement but their presence and the sound emanating from it is enough. Confident and self-assured, even with minimal crowd interaction Cryptic Shift's otherworldly music still makes this the most engrossing of experiences.

WILL MARSHALL

GRAVE MIASMA
CROM DUBH
ELECTROWERKZ, LONDON

Residing in the underbelly of the occult, headliners Grave Miasma are fathers to some of the more cavernous, substantial extreme bands crawling out of the UK. Unleashing melodic wrath, **CROM DUBH** have the necessary, sulphur-infused sensibility; their misery-drenched take on BM marries unpretentious songwriting with stomping tempos, offering nods to the Norwegian second wave of BM and more subtle folk-leaning dissonance. Rising as Goat Molestör in the early 2000s, **GRAVE MIASMA**'s early raw and muddy material has given way to an emphasis on atmosphere and vocal density above the riff. Tonight's set, comprised of tracks from latest release *Abyss Of Wrathful Deities*, is ritualistic to the core. The vocals, filled with esoteric references, sound as though they're being spun in a centrifuge, but they form a perfect union with the rhythmic instrumental cadences draped in reverb and distortion. At their core, Grave Miasma are a niche and seasoned taste, fusing the mysticism and abstraction of BM with the doomier undertones of death. The sound takes the belligerent battery of Beherit and Blasphemy and suffuses it with a heady atmosphere. No nonsense, no robes, but an out-of-body experience all the same.

IEVA ISABELLA RUIZ

SABRINA RAMDOYAL

HRH GOTH

THE FORUM, LONDON

Fields Of The Nephilim and My Dying Bride shine a light from the dark

IT'S A TESTAMENT to the two-day HRH Goth event – taking place in both London and the goths' spiritual home, Leeds – that its line-up affirms the genre was never one monolithic entity, but rather a broad church regularly patching itself with updates, still with the capacity to tap into something timeless. From the poppy post-punk of **IN ISOLATION** through **DEADFILMSTAR**'s sleazy industrialism, like Ministry lurking in the shadows, to **RED SUN REVIVAL**'s wracked romanticism drawing from both Fields Of The Nephilim and the 80s 'Big Music' of bands like The Waterboys, there's a whole sonic spectrum to wave your arms around to.

Germany's **LORD OF THE LOST** bring some decidedly upbeat Euro-sparkle to the Saturday night. The Rammstein-esque traction of the grooves pull them out of the retro gravity well into bouncy, anthemic party territory with enough grit in Chris Harm's voice to give the Cenobite-tailored crew an engaging sense of drama, even just about keeping you on their side when they break out into an industrial samba routine. What LOTL aren't, however, is a natural precursor to headliners **MY DYING BRIDE**. Markedly different in tone, it's more the context than the impeccable set itself that makes their first gig in over four years feel more like a practice run. For all the depth of emotion being eked out over the course of the next 90 minutes, its immersive nature and the gothic rather than *Goth* sensibility that permeates every doom-laden chord, they're an ultimately elevating experience, if not a natural high to end even a goth night. For the diehards, though, this is slow-release nirvana, ranging across almost their entire history, from the lush, distance-gazing longing of *Your Broken Shore* back through the scorched, closing *Turn Loose The Swans*. It's a show of elegantly borne torment, like being liberated over the course of aeons.

Maybe Sunday headliners **FIELDS OF THE NEPHILIM** will grace us with a new album at some point, but the fact that setlist variation still rests on will they/won't they play *Psychonaut* (they don't), matters not. The five-album world they've created over the past 37 years is so encompassing and evergreen that it feels eternally replenishing. This is a band whose radiantly progressive, spiritual qualities don't just inspire fandom; from the veneration of the crowd, it's more a *calling*. The sensuality of *Dawnrazor* kneading itself into a state of exultant grace, *Mourning Sun*'s heart-torn romanticism and *Last Exit For The Lost*'s rapt communion all take you out of time and into the most hallowed and unifying of spaces.

JONATHAN SELZER

My Dying Bride's Aaron Stainthorpe still remembers the lyrics after four years

Lord Of The Lost's set kinda lingers

DEREK BREMNER

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FIVE MINUTES WITH ADDI TRYGGVASON SÓLSTAFIR

Sólstafir's frontman on regressing to childhood and how to avoid accidentally sleeping with a relative

WORDS: MATT MILLS • PICTURE: ÍRIS DÖGG EINARSDÓTTIR

Is it true that the population of Iceland is so small that there's an app to prevent you from accidentally fucking a relative?
"True story, dude! I haven't used it, but it was built by a company called Decode. They were doing studies on genetics and DNA. If you were from Iceland, I'd put in your full name and mine, click enter and find where we are related. Everybody is related as far back as at least nine generations, so it's OK to have sex with someone related to you nine generations ago. That's fine! Ha ha! But where's the threshold? Is it three generations? Six? Because you're pretty much always fucking your relatives."

You wrote the debut album from your side-project Bastarður, *Satan's Loss Of Son*, while forced to live with your dad, and the last Sólstafir album was inspired by abusive relationships. Do you think great art comes from adversity?
"Sure, but this was more done out of love for my childhood favourites. I've always wanted to make an album that was to Entombed's standards. Without Entombed, without Terrorizer, this project would never exist. It's basically something on my childhood bucket list and I'm loving it. I can get away with getting death metal legends like Marc [Grewe] from Morgoth on an album. If you'd told me that in 1991, I'd have shit myself."

You recorded the Bastarður album in your dad's garage, revisited your early love for death metal and even included a cover of a song by your old punk band. Is this your midlife crisis album?
"I'm gonna be an old fart and say not really. In reality, it's just me living life and enjoying it. If you're a metalhead and play guitar, tuning a guitar down to B to get that Entombed sound is like porn. Some people play golf; I like to play death metal and crustpunk."

"SOME PEOPLE PLAY GOLF; I LIKE TO PLAY DEATH METAL"

How many purists have asked Sólstafir to go back to making black metal? What's your response to that?
"Ha ha! I've had many. Most ask, 'Will Sólstafir ever do a black metal album again?' I'll usually just say, 'Yeah! We're gonna do 12 black metal albums' and keep bullshitting until they realise I'm joking. I get it, but if Metallica only did *Kill 'Em All* 10 times in a row, we'd have missed out on a lot of stuff. Stagnation is death. I wanna continue forward."

In the 90s, you distributed the Sólstafir demo by giving it to a blind audiobook salesman…
"That guy knew what he was doing. Those were crazy times. When we did our demo, there was one company in Iceland who would make cassettes, and they were audiobooks for blind people. But, it turned out fine; the demo was fine. It was a complete Burzum rip-off but I was proud of it. We did 100 cassettes, we all had PO boxes and we were immersed in the underground. Life before the internet, man."

You once said that the best compliment anyone can give you is, "Sólstafir sound like Sólstafir." What's the worst thing that anyone could say about your music?
"That it's unoriginal. We always want to explore new territory, so if someone said, 'It's all the same; it's AC/DC in the 80s', then I'd be offended. But the thing is, we've always gotten good reviews: eights, nines and tens. I always wondered, 'When are we gonna get a bad review? I'm really looking forward to it.' If someone can write a bad review with good criticisms, that interests me."

How's the next Sólstafir album looking? Any progress?
"It's weird timing – we haven't played any songs from the last album live yet. All I can say is that if we were going to go into the studio in three months' time, we'd have ideas for half an album. The last album came out a year ago and we haven't done any touring, but I had a daughter last year and Hallgrímur [Jón Hallgrímsson, drummer] had a son two months later. We might have material for half an album, but we're not in a hurry. I hate writing albums, because there are so many arguments."

***SATAN'S LOSS OF SON* IS OUT ON OCTOBER 29 VIA SEASON OF MIST. SÓLSTAFIR TOUR THE UK WITH KATATONIA IN FEBRUARY**

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